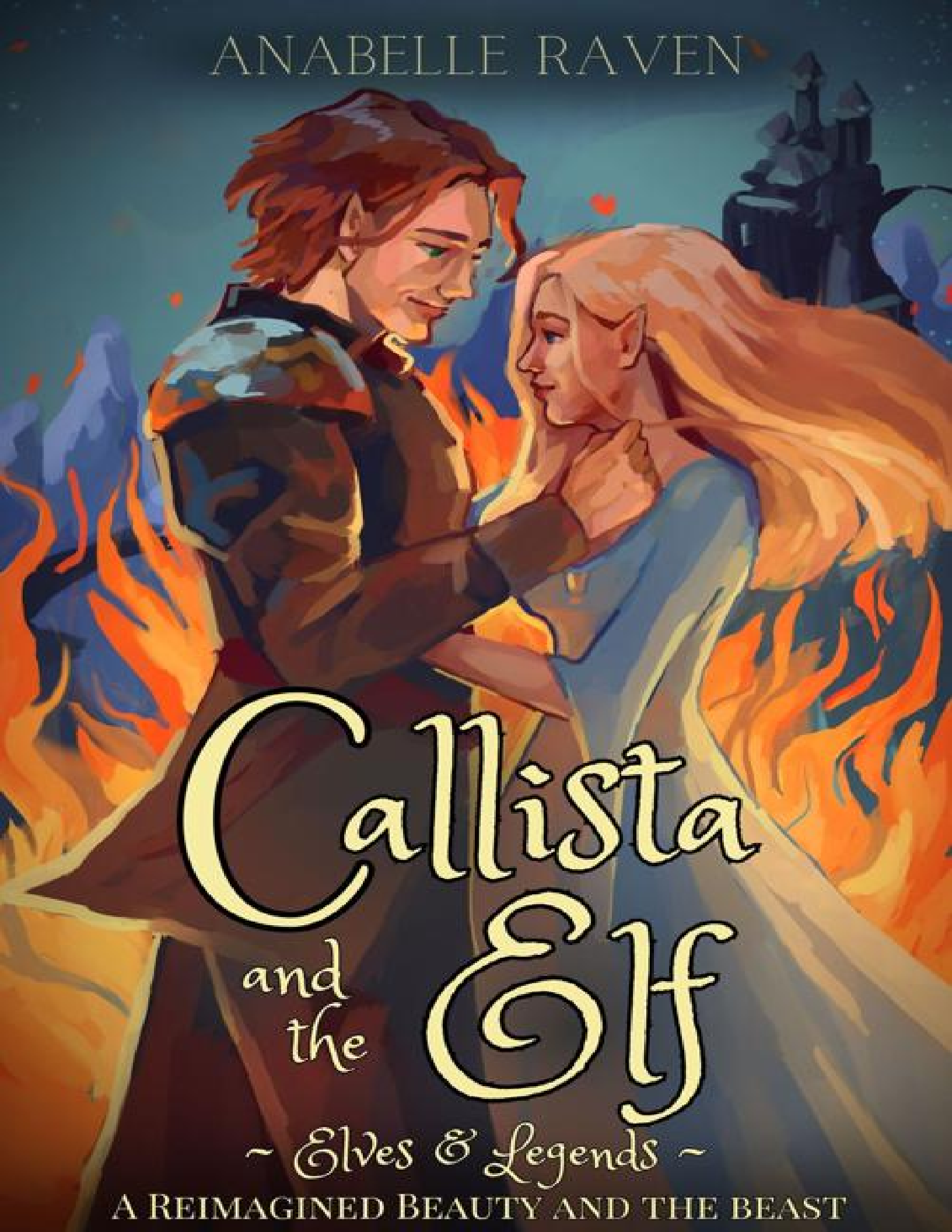




ANABELLE RAVEN

Callista and the Elf

~ Elves & Legends ~

A REIMAGINED BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

CALLISTA AND THE ELF

A reimagined Beauty and the Beast story

Book 5 in the Elves & Legends series

By Anabelle Raven

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DEDICATION:

To SWJ. May you see your strengths and your weaknesses and wield the power to embrace them both.

BOOKS BY ANABELLE RAVEN

Elves & Legends:

[Ella and the Elf: A Reimagined Cinderella](#)

[Marian and the Elf: A Reimagined Robin Hood](#)

[Prequel Novella: Stone Hearts and the Elves: A Reimagined Princess and the Pea](#)

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The books in Elves & Legends are all standalone stories, but they are best enjoyed in the above order because each book contains spoilers for previous books.

Sandig Skaa Chronicles:

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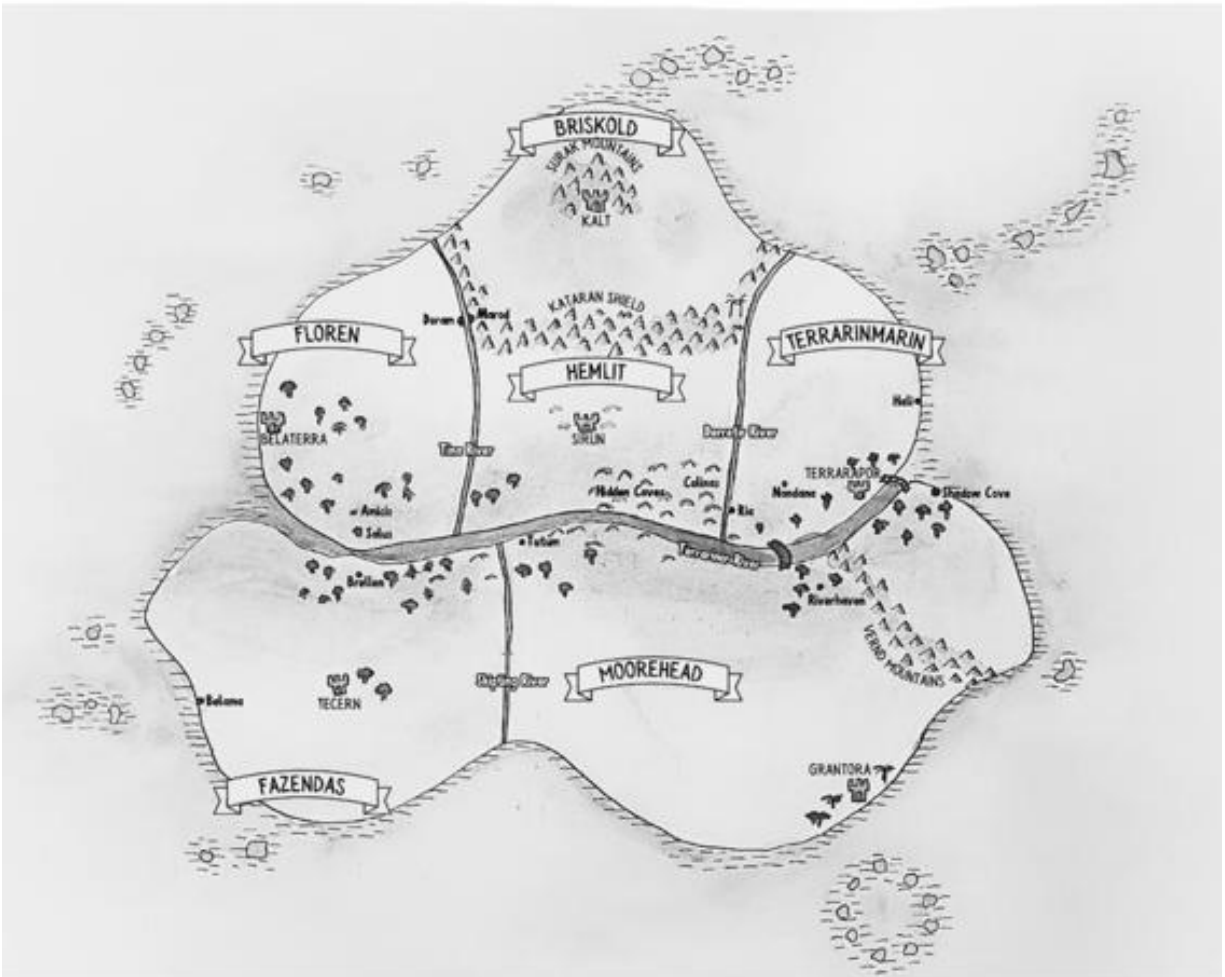
[Book 3: Sand and Stone](#)

[Prequel Novelette: Alyssa's Choice](#)

[Prequel Novel: Djimon and Alena](#)

The three main books in the Sandig Skaa Chronicles trilogy should be read in order. The two prequels can be read in any order, before or after any of the other books.

MAP:



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CONTENT GUIDE:

Potential Triggers:

- Death & loss of family members, heartache and grief
- Themes of revenge, betrayal, offense, redemption, forgiveness
- Assassins, death, murder, slavery

Romance Spice Level: Low

- Emotional kisses, embraces, G-rated touches





CHAPTER 1: CALLISTA

Winter 1009 yap

9 months after events in Ice and the Elves

The Terrarinor River, separating the northern border of Moorehead from the southern border of Hemlit

My brother's magic lit his trail across the great Terrarinor River like smoke highlights the trail of heat from a candle. Ignoring it would be wisest—Alastor was technically an adult—but I'd embraced the habit of looking out for him years ago, and I couldn't leave him to whatever fate he was about to find in the land of the elves.

Plus, I'd asked him to go hunting. If anything happened to him, I'd feel responsible.

I lifted my skirts up, carefully folding the pockets over so nothing spilled, and tied them around my waist. This river had never been passable during my life, but the wind storm last night had toppled a tree several hundred feet tall that now spanned the gorge like a bridge.

And naturally, my brother had to cross it.

I climbed up the icy, gnarled branches and spread my chilled hands to balance while I stood up on top of the bark. Underneath the makeshift

bridge, stony cliffs guarded the ravine—cliffs that surrounded a terrifying river. I pressed one foot forward, closer to the death trap that waited below.

When the cliffs gave way to the raging river, my hands trembled. I dropped to my knees and clung to ridges in the bark.

What was I thinking?

I had worse balance than everyone I knew.

Of course, I'd only really known three other people well, but that didn't matter. I always tripped. Always fell. Always stumbled. Always found disaster. And I thought I could cross a river on an icy tree trunk?

I forced a few breaths into my chest, tightening my hold on the tree. This tree was so wide that I could not hope to wrap my arms around it. The thing was more than stable enough for me to balance on while I crossed the river that separated humans and elves.

But if I slipped, I would die.

There was no way to survive that fall. And if I were dead, I could not help my hotheaded brother who felt like trespassing into the elves' kingdom.

I had to make it across.

But I didn't have to stand up. I reached forward and gripped another handful of frigid bark. I moved my other arm forward, and then my knees. It was a good thing I'd worn leggings under my skirts.

Alastor probably ran across this *bridge*. He might have even skipped or turned a flip. Just the thought of it made my stomach turn. He probably saw it and decided it was the perfect opportunity to find out what had happened to our mother when she left us to visit the elves and disappeared thirteen years ago.

My crawl was hesitant and awkward and freezing, but it worked. I kept my eyes on my hands and the surface directly in front of me. Eventually, I slid off the tree's roots and onto the foreign stone cliffs. I sank to the ground and quieted my breathing like Motab had taught me decades ago.

Elves.

I now sat on Elven lands. I gazed across the river to the human kingdom I'd left behind. I didn't really belong there, but I'd never been *here* before. And the things Motab and Fotab had told us about elves had always been enough to keep me solidly on my side of the river.

Until now.

If Alastor didn't need rescuing, I was going to kill him myself.

I brushed off some snow that clung to my skirts with the last bits of residual terror about falling into the Terrarinor, and stood to follow his trail again.

For hours.

He hadn't found any kind of path at all, but crossed a fairly straight line through fields and into a forest. The trees thickened, but the magic he'd dropped led me on—almost as if he'd wanted me to follow him.

I bit back a curse. Just because he had turned thirty this year didn't mean he could now tell me what to do. He never would have made it this far without—

A roar filled the skies and interrupted my thoughts. I stumbled but caught myself before hitting the ground.

A dragon.

A dragon flew less than half a mile from me. It circled once, and then settled out of my view. Fotab had described the creatures in detail, but I'd never seen—or heard—one in real life before.

I ran forward. I didn't want to confront the thing, but I had to see it. Surely I could find a way to spy on the beast.

The answer presented itself within minutes. A boulder with easy handholds and scores rose up above the bare winter trees.

As I scrambled up the giant rock, a thundering voice rumbled through the forest. "What. Are. You. Doing?"

I climbed faster. A sinking dread filled my stomach. It would be just like Alastor to do something offensive to a dragon in an elven kingdom.

The stone blocked the answer of whoever the dragon spoke to, but his rumbling voice filled the forest again. “YOU ATTACKED MY ROSES!”

I finally reached the top of the boulder and peered down. A frozen meadow sprawled away in front of the other side of the boulder. A hundred feet from me, Alastor planted his hands on his hips. “I did not,” he bellowed back. Apparently, he felt the need to compete with the dragon’s volume.

Smoke rose from the dragon’s black back, as if the beast could shoot fire from his scales. “You attacked my roses,” he hissed, “you put a hole in my protective barrier, *and* you lied.”

Alastor started to say something, but I couldn’t understand it because the dragon lifted a scaled arm and shot fire out of his palm.

Not a dragon, then. A drekkan. Dragons breathed fire. Drekkans breathed fire... and released it from their hands and tail.

Alastor raised his own arms and met the beast’s fire with his own. I groaned. Just because my brother had magic didn’t mean he needed to use it all the time. The opposing flames clashed between the two of them, growing into an inferno hot enough that I felt it.

I wanted to shake my brother. He should know better than to argue with a giant flame-throwing reptile!

But he didn’t stop. “Is that all you’ve got?” he yelled over the blaze. “So much for a legendary monster!”

Seriously?! What was wrong with him?

The drekkan did not say anything, but his tail snaked around his wings until it had a clear shot at Alastor. A new stream of fire from the drekkan’s tail blasted Alastor’s left side, throwing him to the ground.

My heart nearly stopped. I could not watch my brother die. Not here. Not like this. Not after I’d spent the last thirteen years keeping us both alive.

I rushed to climb down the boulder. I nearly fell trying to watch the drekkan while moving at the same time.

The beast blew another wall of fire at my brother while he was already down. Would the monster kill Alastor while he was incapacitated? I panicked at the thought, lost my grip on the boulder, and slipped the final ten feet to the ground.

I landed on the edge of my foot, which rolled under my weight. I lunged to the side with all the grace of a cave bear balancing on an ice pick. I hoped to take the weight off my ankle before I injured it, but instead I knocked the breath out of my chest.

I didn't dare take the time to recover—I had to stop the drekkan from destroying my brother.

I ran, gasping and half-limping across the meadow. A wall of magic burned around the edges of the meadow, but my ability to see magic led me safely through a jagged opening. The fire-melted, muddy landscape clung to my boots, but my mind focused on how Alastor was about to die... and I had to save him.

My clumsy fall and blundering run caught the drekkan's attention. His great head followed my movements and a hairless brow raised higher over one eye.

I ignored the curious look and kept running until I was directly between him and my brother.

My heart raced. I'd never seen a legendary monster before, and now one towered over me. Legs thicker than my entire body balanced his reptilian body with arms, wings, and a tail. His head lowered to focus on me as I planted my body in front of him.

I raised my arms as if I could block him from attacking Alastor. "Stop!" I cried, still panting.

What was I thinking, ordering a creature twenty times my size around?

"Please!" I corrected. "Please spare my brother."

The drekkan's eyes narrowed. "He trespassed, broke my barrier, attacked my flowers, and lied. He deserves a swift justice."

"But if you kill him, he will learn nothing!" I panted, still catching my breath after my fall and run. The drekkan seemed to be considering my words, so I risked a glance at Alastor. His blackened clothes highlighted the burns on every bit of his exposed skin, but he still breathed... which meant he could still heal himself.

But Fotab had made drekkans sound like angry, unreasonable monsters. What if this one killed both of us just for crossing his invisible barrier?

Smoke puffed out of the drekkan's nostrils as he lowered his head closer to mine. He softened his voice, but it still grated like a knife against a sharpening stone. "I will not leave him alive to return and destroy my roses."

Whoever heard of a drekkan obsessed with roses? That was not in any of Fotab's stories. I peeked at the rose bush the drekkan gestured at. The poor *bush* grew like two shrunken sprigs. Despite its withered size and the winter cold, six red roses bloomed along its little branches.

The roses were a strange cause, but... the weight of the drekkan's words hit me. *I will not leave him alive to return and destroy my roses.*

I locked eyes with the drekkan. His head still loomed eight feet above mine. "He won't return or destroy anything," I said.

The drekkan stared at me. I wanted to crawl—no, run—away, but I ground my teeth and stared back. A glint of magic that reminded me of my mother flickered around the east like a halo. What could that mean? The drekkan's head lowered into my space. It took all the courage and curiosity I'd ever mustered to stand my ground. Even if Alastor had done the things the drekkan accused him of, he didn't deserve to die.

The reptile's volume lowered again. "And what would stop him from returning and attacking me again?"

"I would," I answered without hesitation.

A cruel, sardonic laugh shook the drekkan's belly while a cloud of smoke burst out of his mouth.

I stepped back, closer to Alastor, and put my hands on my hips. "And what's so funny about that?"

"You are child-sized," the monster said. "You could not stop a rabbit from crossing a border, let alone a fully grown human..." His voice turned to a snarl. "A human that reeks like fae." He tipped his head at me. "You, too, smell like fae, but your brother does not look like the monsters."

I almost laughed at the irony of *him* calling fae 'monsters,' but I resisted—I didn't want to offend him further. And the more we talked, the more likely it seemed that I could convince him to release Alastor.

He tipped his head again, like a giant overgrown dog who'd been confused by a hidden toy. "Why *did* you call this fae-acting creature your brother?"

Ah. He was confused. I could fix that. "We both share the same parents: a fae mother and a human father."

His brows lowered and he raised his head. "A compelling reason to kill you both."

"What?!" I clenched my dress. Was that what had happened to my mother? Is that why her magic flickered around him? "I've done nothing to warrant death!"

"I protect these borders and the elves inside them," the drekkan rumbled. "Fae are the greatest threat I know." A brief expression, almost like regret, crossed his bright green eyes, but he blinked it away. "Defend yourself, Fae."

"No, wait!" Before I finished yelling the words, the drekkan released a stream of fire. I closed my eyes tight, as if not seeing it would keep death away from me.

An unexpected rush of heat came from behind me. I tore my eyes open just in time to see another wall of flames meet the drekkan's.

Alastor.

I turned toward Alastor, still lying on the ground, propping himself up on one elbow to shoot fae magic at the drekkan. As their two fires crashed against each other, Alastor pulled all the oxygen out of the air immediately surrounding the drekkan.

The beast's eyes widened as his flames disappeared.

Alastor dropped his fire too. "She can't use magic, you monster." Manipulating as much power as he had in his burnt, injured state put him on the edge of consciousness. My throat tightened and tears jumped to my eyes. He was using his last bit of energy to protect me instead of heal himself.

"Attacking her is no better than attacking a child," Alastor added. "Your fight is with me, anyway. Let her go. She wouldn't hurt you if she could."

The drekkan raised a claw, and a line of fire skittered out of his palm, ignoring me, and landing like a whip across my brother's body. Alastor fell back to the ground.

"No!" I dropped to my knees and felt his chest for a pulse. A sob ripped out of my throat when I found one. He lived. For now.

I turned back to the drekkan, still on my knees. "Please!" There had to be a way to stop him, something that could touch a black-hearted beast like him. "There must be something I can do for you!"

The drekkan's giant face studied me, scanning my body as if I hid some secret. Then he turned his gaze to my brother.

"No!" I jumped to my feet. "Please don't! He is dying." The words caught in my throat, but I pushed on. "He needs time to heal. He can't just keep taking hits like this!"

The drekkan's gaze locked on mine. "What would you be willing to do for him?"

"Anything," I whispered.

"Anything?" the rumbling voice questioned. "Do you know anything about elves or drekkans?"

I nodded. I had read a great deal about both elves and drekkans.

The monster brought his head closer to mine. “And you would do anything a drekkan asked in a land ruled by elves?”

“Anything,” I clarified, “if you send my brother home.”

A hand wrapped around my ankle. “No, Callista,” Alastor whispered. “I’m the one who started this. *You* should go home.”

“You’re in no state to argue,” I whispered back. “At least I can keep us both alive.”

“No, Callis—”

A hot cloud of ashy smoke from the drekkan cut off Alastor’s words. My brother rolled over, groaning and coughing.

The drekkan faced me. “I am willing to let him go if you stay here, bound to me with a mistek bond as assurance. If *he* crosses into my lands again, I will kill *you* instantly.”

My eyes widened. “You... want me to be a slave?” I hadn’t known drekkans could create the slave bond.

“No,” his voice rumbled. “You would not be a slave. You would be a prisoner. The mistek bond simply creates the collateral I believe necessary to allow a creature like him to live.”

“The collateral being my life?” I asked.

He nodded, tipping that great head down once. “Yes. You would be perfectly safe unless he crosses my magic border again.” Venom dripped from his voice. “I will feel his cursed fae magic inside my lands. And if that happens, you will die.”

“Such a strange request,” I muttered, as my mind listed all the potential dangers of such an arrangement.

“Not so strange,” the drekkan breathed. “I believe he cares about you enough to leave my kingdom alone in safety.”

Alastor didn't move, but his breathy whisper was easy to hear in the eerie silence that hung heavy with my choice. "No, Callista. Go home."

I knelt down by my brother for the last time and brushed a lock of black hair out of his face. He groaned, no doubt as much from the pain as from frustration with his inability to fight more. This was an easy choice. I would live in a prison if it meant Alastor could *live*.

I kissed the top of his head, above his round ears, and blinked back tears. "We're both going to live, Al. Move to the human town. Start a new life. Find love—"

His hand gripped mine. "Callista, you cannot trust a monster."

"I don't trust him," I whispered. "I trust you. Don't come back, and I'll be fine. We'll both live. It's a good deal."

"She's here," he whispered back. "I felt her magic when I was hunting."

"Motab?" I asked.

He nodded.

That explained a lot. But it didn't change the situation at hand. "I'll find her," I promised. Hopefully, I would find our mother. I didn't know why her magic—or something similar to it—kept appearing around the drekkan, but I wasn't opposed to having time to find out. We'd expected her to be here for years—maybe some good could come from this unusual deal.

The drekkan's voice filled the valley. "Are you in agreement?" Apparently, we'd reached the end of his patience.

I stood up. "We are."

He shifted closer to me, raising his head and extending a clawed finger as long as I was tall. "I must put my finger on your back to form the bond." It was the softest he'd spoken yet, though his voice still came out harsh and raw.

He did not move after his explanation. Was he waiting for permission?

I nodded my agreement, and he carefully touched the middle of my back. His touch was warm, almost hot, but gentler than I'd expected. If I hadn't seen his claws earlier, I wouldn't have known he had them.

"You will have to identify yourself and agree to the bond," his gravelly tone whispered slowly.

I nodded again.

His strange soft voice rumbled through the air. "I, Aedan, High King of Hemlit, offer you a mistek bond, bringing you into my house and under my authority, for the duration of the bond."

A silver stream of magic rushed around my body like a spinning wind. It tightened around my chest and swirled ashes in the air around us.

What was I doing? I knew that mistek bonds gave the elf—or drekkan—holding it power to command the other. And what kind of kingdom had a drekkan as a high king? Did I really want to give the monster in front of me the ability to pour pain into my chest? To feel my emotions? To force me to do his bidding?

But what was the alternative? Watching Alastor die?

No, this was worth it. And he had said I'd be safe. I had to hold onto the hope that deception was beyond a beast's comprehension. He only wanted this bond as a threat to Alastor.

"I, Callista, accept your bond, Aedan, High King of Hemlit."

The swirling pressure sank into my lungs, freezing my breath for an instant, but then releasing it and disappearing. I felt nothing, but I could see a thin magic cord running from my chest to the drekkan's wrist.

And then my twisted ankle stopped hurting.

Had he healed it? Or was my focus on everything else distracting me from the relatively small pain? I looked up into the monster's green eyes, and I thought I saw that shadow of regret again—but it was a fleeting shadow. He turned away from me, picked up Alastor, and laid him next to the hole in the magic wall at the edge of the meadow.

“Take yourself home, *Fae*,” the drekkan rumbled. “The barrier is healing itself—leave before it closes. And if I ever smell your foul magic again, I will kill your sister.”

Alastor glanced at me. I forced myself to smile and wave, despite the nerves that made me want to vomit. He nodded and crawled to the edge of the meadow. Once he passed through the hole in the barrier, he collapsed, hopefully to rest and heal.

The drekkan swept back across the meadow. “We need to get you to the fortress. I...”

I looked closer at the monster. Was he nervous about something? Or was I misinterpreting his stutter?

He opened a fist. “The fastest way there is if I carry you. Is that acceptable?”

I raised a brow. “Doesn’t the mistek bond allow you to demand that I agree?”

His bright green eyes bored into mine. “It does, but I already told you I would not use it that way. I will only use it as a deterrent to your brother.”

Lovely.

He was a noble monster. He would only use the slave bond as a fast way to kill me. Relief settled on me like a poor-fitting cloak, and I nodded. “It is acceptable.”

Two of the drekkan’s clawed fingers wrapped around my waist and lifted me without effort. Icy wind smacked my face as we soared into the air, but I ignored the numbing chill. I had never seen the world from this perspective... and I didn’t intend to ever do so again. This was my only chance to see everything.

Miles of snow-covered forests flew past us. From our height, the land looked like a painting for sale in the human’s Tutum market. The scenes could easily convince me that the world was a calm, peaceful place with no loss, no mysteries, and no prejudice. But I knew better. And my thoughts bombarded me with questions.

Why did the elves have a drekkan king? Why was he more honorable than the monsters in Fotab's stories? Did kings always act as border guards here? Why was he obsessed with a little rose bush? Had he enchanted it to bloom in the winter? And how was my mother's magic here?

I couldn't ask any of my questions because we flew fast enough that my voice would have been lost in the cold wind that rushed past us. The longer we flew, the more I appreciated the heat that rose from his fingers. Did he realize that his hand's heat was the only thing keeping me alive on this frigid ride?

Well, maybe not alive, but it definitely prevented frostbite.

A black stone fortress started to take shape against the white snow. As we approached, my thoughts fuzzed—his *fortress* was more than just a castle. It was...

It was mind-numbing. I'd read about it. I'd seen sketches of it, but nothing could have prepared me for its reality.

The fortress seemed to float in the air 200 feet above a frozen lake. But when I looked closer, it wasn't really floating. It sat on top of a stone spire that rose from the middle of the lake. One terrifying, long, skinny, ice-encrusted bridge spanned the impossible distance between the craggy shoreline and a wide courtyard protected by walls and a portcullis in front of the castle keep.

An almost-friendly looking town surrounded the approach to the bridge. Icy shadows glared at me from the other end—the end that touched down on the spire in front of the portcullis. Those walls and ramparts and towers rose like ominous sentries that wanted to keep me out.

I scoffed to myself. No stone walls *wanted* to keep me out. No, it was the elves who lived inside them that I needed to worry about.

And the drekkan who defended them. He hovered over the courtyard in front of the castle's main entrance while dozens of elves scurried out of his way. Did they scurry in fear or did they appreciate his visit?

He landed and set me carefully on my feet in front of the stairs to the castle door.

A dozen people moved toward us with curious expressions. An older elf dipped her chin toward the drekkan and descended the steps. “Who have you found, Your Majesty?”

Majesty. Right. The drekkan was a king.

I stared at the elves approaching. They seemed kind enough. Most of their expressions were friendly and some, like the older woman, looked positively welcoming.

The drekkan shifted, and I turned and saw him making eye contact with a soldier. “Mylo. She needs to be contained in a dungeon.”

A dungeon?!

Mylo didn’t say anything, but his deep bow and hard expression left me no doubt that he would follow his king’s orders. The drekkan crouched and spread his wings, as if preparing to fly away.

“Wait!” I cried, lifting an arm. I dropped my arm at his imperious brow raise. This was not some horse I could grab by the mane. This was a monster with a magical bond that could force me to do... anything. But my mouth had never practiced restraining my thoughts. “Couldn’t you *contain* me in a room?”

His chuckle vibrated through the air like a rolling thunder, and he shook his head as if I’d told a great joke. “I do not trust you to stay contained in a room.”

I tipped my head. “You don’t need to trust me. You have magic.” He could just order me to stay there. Or force me to promise. The bond would not let me leave in either case.

He brought his head lower so I could see his eyes better. “I will not use magic in such a way.”

I threw my hands up in exasperation. “But you’ll use it to kill me?”

Several elves around us gasped softly or raised their brows. Did they not expect this from a monster for a king?

“Correct,” he said, rising back up to his natural height. “Mylo.” The guard stepped forward, but so did the older woman. My heart sped up. Perhaps I would have an unexpected advocate in this woman.

“Is the girl dangerous?” she asked.

Girl. I nearly groaned out loud. Could she be any more condescending? I’d been an adult for more than a decade.

The drekkan took several long moments to fan his gaze across the entire courtyard before settling it on me. Even through his grinding tones, venom laced every word. “She is fae.”

Those three words threw the courtyard into chaos. Most of the elves screamed and ran away. The *king* jumped into the sky and flew out of sight.

I spun, frantically hoping to find any of the friendly faces I’d seen minutes earlier, but they all disappeared. Horror and fear stared at me from anyone brave enough to not run out of my view.

Two strong hands gripped my upper arms from behind me. I tried to turn and see my captor, but he held me still.

“Don’t move.” The instructions came in a soft voice just above my head. They left no room for argument, but they weren’t harsh.

“I’m not dangerous.” I hated how my voice trembled, but I couldn’t help attempting to explain.

“I know.”

He knew? Did that mean he believed me? But he still held my arms as if he expected me to attack. I tried looking over my shoulder and squirmed enough to see Mylo’s impassive face.

His hands tightened, and I faced forward again.

“Be still,” he hissed. “There is more at stake here than you realize.”

“What does that mean?” I whispered. “What are you going to do with me?”

He waited a few more seconds, until even the older elf I'd hoped would speak for me had left the courtyard. He let go of my arms, moved to my left side, and gripped my arm while drilling his stone-grey eyes into mine. "I will do exactly as my king instructed. Contain you in a dungeon cell."





CHAPTER 2: AEDAN

I tapped the back of my fork silently against the table. The evening meal was supposed to be the best part of my day, but I couldn't focus on anyone at my table when I had a dark sense that my new prisoner was frightened.

I interrupted Fagan's light-hearted summary of children building snow monsters and smashing them. "Mylo. Is our prisoner safe in the dungeons?"

Of all the elves trapped inside the barrier with me, I trusted Mylo the most. He, Fagan, and my aunt Acantha always ate this meal at my table on the dais.

Mylo dipped his head in a strong nod. "I secured her myself. She won't be going anywhere, but..." He dropped his voice so nobody outside of our table on the raised dais could hear. "Your Majesty, I'm not sure she has magic. At least, not the same kind as the fae who cursed us."

Fagan pursed his lips in a worried line but said nothing. He didn't need to. I knew his opinion tended toward sympathy.

My aunt, the only other elf at our table, leaned closer to me. Any sympathies she'd had when I'd set the prisoner in the courtyard had disappeared. "If she is fae, you cannot trust her. She might act as if she has

no magic only to get you to drop your guard. There is no way to know what she has planned.”

I whispered back. “I don’t trust her. And I have a... failsafe. She won’t be able to enact any plans.” I couldn’t quite bring myself to tell them about the mistek bond. We had all—along with my cousins—shared disgust when we saw them being used in Terrarinmarin decades ago. But it had been the only way I could think of to safely grant her wishes of letting both her and her horrible brother live.

My thoughts drifted back to this afternoon when she’d thrown her tiny body in front of her brother. And then, instead of defending herself, she’d closed her eyes and tried to protect him like a living shield.

It was not so wrong to want to preserve that kind of goodness. But freeing both of them would only have endangered my people here, and I refused to hurt the elves who depended on me any further. It was as she said—they were both alive. Surely that was better than—

I slammed my fork down on the table. It had hit me again—that vague sense of her terror. Like a burnt undercurrent when a sauce boils over and the drippings turn to ash while the pot continues to scent the air, her fear nagged at my senses, then faded, and then came again.

I could no longer deny it, which meant I could no longer ignore it. I stood, and both Fagan and Mylo followed. I waved them back down. “Finish your meal. I need to check on her.” I caught Mylo’s eye. “Which cell?”

He remained standing to answer. “The farthest from the entrance. I didn’t think she needed to be near... the others.”

I nodded and stormed out of the dining hall.

At least I could walk on my own two feet at night. The fire-storming fae who had cursed me left me some dignity. A drekkan growl almost erupted from my elven throat. How I hated that fae. Killing both of the half-fae I’d met earlier would have been easier than dealing with one alive and in my castle. Then my one pleasant meal of the day would not have been so interrupted.

My mind refused to entertain the thought. I might be ruthless, but I didn't kill for convenience. And the one fae I had killed—she might have deserved it, but her death still left my stomach in a twisted knot whenever I thought about her.

That distinct sense of my prisoner's fear spiked again as I reached the bottom of the stone staircase that descended below the castle and into the dungeon. I shoved through the door. That spike lingered, and my stomach turned. She should be accustomed to the dungeon by now. Her fears should be shrinking, not growing.

I skipped three steps at a time down the next stairway, and didn't bother stopping the final door from crashing closed behind me. Bralen, the dungeon guard for the night, stood at a desk near the front and bowed as I plowed past him. We had a small labyrinth of cells, and it would take me several more minutes to reach her at this pace.

Her fear increased again, and a sharp sense of pain punctuated it. I started running. Something was wrong.

I had never held a mistek bond before, and I had not realized it would make me aware of her fears and pain. But the longer it lasted, the more sure I was of the feelings I was trying to interpret.

Just before I rounded the final corner, her anxious voice cried out, "What is wrong with you?!"

One voice snickered in response while another started to answer, "We're just giving you a proper welcome. If old Bralen had let us use the keys, this would have been even more fun."

I stopped running and strode toward the two young adults with a glare that threatened death. I turned the corner just in time to see Koan throw a stone at my prisoner. Her wrists were shackled to the wall in magic-cancelling cuffs that forced her to stand. She tried to cover her head with her arms, but Koan's stone struck her thigh. He and Jolter laughed... and then they saw me.

Smoke poured out of my palms and rose off my shoulders. I felt it, and I stopped it from bursting into flames, but I did not mind if these two

krimpets believed they were inches away from death.

They dropped to the ground and pressed their foreheads against the stone floor.

“What. Are. You. Doing?” I spoke through clenched teeth, as much upset at them as at myself for not having come sooner.

They kept their heads to the floor, but Koan answered. “We wanted to meet the fae.”

I clenched my fists. How was it that they could grow up in a kingdom where I demanded discipline, justice, and honor, and still treat someone with such cowardice and cruelty?

I dropped my voice, not quite to the drekkan’s gravelly tone, but one that promised dark justice. “Then perhaps I should release her so she has the opportunity to *meet* you as well.”

Koan’s horrified face raised from the ground. “But... she’s a fae! She might use an even worse curse than—”

“Then you should have left her alone!” I bellowed at him. He dropped his face back to the ground, and I stepped closer to them. “You attacked someone who could not fight back, could not even defend herself—”

Jolter’s face popped up this time. “Your Majesty! We didn’t really attack her! We didn’t throw any above her waist. We just wanted to...”

I stared at him, but he seemed to have lost the words. Perhaps he finally realized the severity of his actions. “To what?”

He pressed his forehead back to the ground. “Nothing, sir. It was a poor decision.”

Koan side-eyed his brother, but did not lift his head again.

I put a sinister leer in my voice. “Since you attacked someone who could not fight back, run, or protect herself in any way, justice demands you endure the same experience.” I waited a few seconds for that to sink into their minds, and then waved my hand; binding them with invisible magic to the floor in their bowed positions.

I pressed on the gate to her cell and bit back a curse. I had not brought the keys. For the first time since I'd arrived, I focused my gaze on her face. Shadows buried her expression, but I tried to gentle mine. Light from torches in sconces along the wall fell on my face, and I did not want to scare her.

But I was too upset at Koan and Jolter to waste time fetching keys.

I covered the bolt with a hand and melted it, silently cursing the insolent twins. Guiding them into adulthood should have been their father's task, not mine, but since they were inside the fortress when the curse landed, I was stuck with them. And their father, a reasonable noble with expansive influence, was stuck outside the cursed boundary.

I forced the gate open, ignored its creaking screech, and walked slowly to my prisoner.

She looked up at me with the same bold, blue eyes that had defended her brother. "Thank you," she whispered.

Her gratitude caught on my lungs and stalled my breath—I did not deserve it. If I had come sooner, I could have stopped them before they actually threw rocks. "I take the safety of my people very seriously." I spoke softly, hoping to avoid frightening her again, but wanting Koan and Jolter to hear me. "You are now included within that purview."

She said nothing, so I raised my hand toward her.

She flinched back, brushing against the wall of the cell as a hint of fear worked its way through the mistek bond.

I lowered my hands and my voice. "I'd like to free you from the manacles. You have nothing to fear."

She nodded, but I still felt her unease. I leaned over her to retrieve the small keys off the shelf three feet above her head. Her body stiffened while I reached over her and remained rigid as I gripped the cuffs. I wanted to say something—anything—to help her relax, but the only thing I could think of was to free her wrists and give her more space.

I unlocked the manacles, returned the key to the shelf, and stepped back two feet.

She rubbed her wrists. “What will you do with me now?”

What would I do with her? I didn’t trust her enough to give her any freedom, but I clearly couldn’t leave her in the dungeon—it had already proven to be unsafe. And I had promised her she’d be safe if her brother stayed away.

A softer fear, more likely anxiety, nudged through the bond and pricked my senses. I needed to convince her she was safe. I *needed* to stop feeling the evidence of my failure to keep her safe.

Maybe, she needed to see that I would not leave Koan and Jolter unpunished. *That* was something I could offer her now—evidence of her safety.

I strolled out of the cell to where they were still pinned to the floor, and tore their fine tunics in half, exposing their bare backs. A sharp, soft intake of breath met my ears as I plucked a whip off the wall between two lighting sconces. She must not have expected to see them punished so quickly.

I gestured for her to join me in the hall. “Come.”

She slipped through the cell door I’d left open and stood next to me. I handed her the whip.

She did not take it.

I raised the handle closer to her. “Their consequence for attacking you is fifty lashes each. You may take the penalty out of their flesh.”

She clenched her hands together in front of her waist and said, “I don’t need that.”

I lowered the whip to my side. “What *do* you need?”

“I...” Her gaze flicked from me to Koan and Jolter, then to the whip, and then back up to me. “I just need them to not attack me again.”

She did not want to see them hurt. I could understand that. “I will punish them, then, and they will never hurt you again.”

“No.” Her voice grew stronger, and she stepped in front of Koan. “I appreciate your help in stopping them, truly I do, but I don’t need to tear them apart to consider justice done. Surely extending them a little kindness will teach them to be kind in return.”

Koan’s face jerked up. My magic pinned his body, but I’d left his head and neck free to move. He could not resist staring at his unlikely champion. I tapped the handle of the whip against my left palm. “I have extended them patience and kindness for years, and the lesson they seem to have garnered from that is that I will overlook their poor behavior. I cannot allow that to continue.”

She pressed her fists against her hips and eyed me with a fiery determination. “But it’s not really your choice, is it?”

Koan coughed in surprise, and Jolter’s head twisted up to stare bug-eyed at her.

My own lips twitched into a smile. Nobody had ever challenged me with such unassuming openness. “Isn’t it?” I asked.

“No,” she declared. “I was the person they wronged, so I should get to decide the justice that will balance the injury they gave me.”

Was this kind of audacity normal fae behavior? Or human? Or a result of her mixed inheritance? The combination of fear that emanated from her through our bond with the pure boldness that she expressed in her posture and language put me on edge. Should I be protecting her invisible fear? Acquiescing to her obvious mandates? Or insisting on the respect I usually expected?

I tapped the whip handle against my palm again. “I cannot simply release them. They have violated a standard of honor that I expect from adults in Hemlit, especially those that have lived in Sirun as long as they have.”

She raised her chin higher, emphasizing a beautiful face. “Then I’d like to speak to the drekkan.”

“The drekkan?” I repeated. Did she mean...

She interrupted my thoughts. “Yes. His Majesty Aedan, the High King drekkan.”

A smile stole across my face as I debated the best way to answer this request. “Is there a reason you would prefer to speak with a legendary monster over me?”

She smiled and answered in a sweeter voice than I’d heard from her yet. “Of course. I would think that as the High King his opinion on punishments would supersede yours.”

Koan coughed again, and my smile stretched even broader. “You believe he would agree with you in this case?”

My questions made her more nervous, but instead of backing down she tightened her fists and raised her chin a little higher. “I’m sure he would, once I explain the situation.”

I couldn’t help a dark chuckle. “And why are you so sure?”

She narrowed her eyes. “He seemed both honorable and reasonable when I spoke with him this afternoon.”

I raised my brows. “An honorable and reasonable monster? How very generous of you.” Especially considering that I’d nearly killed her.

She arched her own brow. “Will you take me to him?” She scanned the dungeon hall. “I don’t think he’ll fit down here.”

My humor had not been so tickled in ages. I bowed to her and tried to temper the grin on my face. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Aedan Vander Ignim, the cursed High King of Hemlit, drekkan by day and elf by night.”





CHAPTER 3: CALLISTA

The elf in front of me was the same drekkan who had bound me. My mind whirled faster than a windstorm on a monsoon night while any thoughts I'd had earlier about his attractive power and dramatic rescue withered. He could force me to administer the punishment he preferred. He could tear those two elves on the floor to pieces. Or he could have let them continue to throw rocks at me.

But he had promised me safety.

And he was following through on that promise by insisting on a dramatic punishment for the two elves behind me.

I bit my lip. I had to find a way to convince him. This was important, so I needed to set aside my usual impulsiveness and think through a response.

The humor in his face faded as he considered my reaction to his news. "Am I no longer an honorable and reasonable beast?"

His question was supposed to be light-hearted, but I heard a painful bit of vulnerability behind it. He had tried to be honorable. Despite his monstrous form, despite his burden of ruling, and despite his easily-pricked temper, he had an ethical standard that he aspired to. *That* was the angle I needed.

“I still believe you are honorable,” I said, “but I’m afraid you have not been diligent in keeping your promise.”

He clenched the handle of the whip and bowed his head. I held my breath. This would either convince him to agree with me or send him into an angry rage. Nobody *enjoyed* being called out for breaking a promise. He might have had the form of an elf, but I felt like I was poking a dragon with a sharpened nail.

He raised a pair of bright green eyes to shoot anger at the two elves on the ground. Then he clenched his jaw and brought his gaze to mine.

“You are correct.” Anger dripped from his soft words and filled the hall. A steel entered his tone. “I promised you safety. I should kill these vermin for forcing me to abandon my honor. While their offense against you was much greater, they did wrong me also.”

I nodded. “A debt to their king is not a small thing.”

His brows knit together. “What do you mean?”

I took a quick breath and stepped closer to him. He was taller than me, muscle-bound, and broad-shouldered. Even without the drekkan’s might, he could overpower me with one hand. He radiated so much power and authority that even shadows drew away from him. Everything about him told me to step back, but I didn’t know how to talk to people from far away.

Heat emanated from his body. I ignored it and met his piercing green eyes. “You *could* beat them for their crimes, but by tomorrow they would be healed. In a few weeks, they might make the same mistakes again.”

The king’s voice darkened. “I could put magic-voiding manacles on them, and they would take weeks to heal.” One of the elves behind me gasped. Apparently he hadn’t considered that.

“Still—” I stepped closer again. Did he have a drekkan’s temperature in his elf form? I could reach out and grab his arm, but... I wasn’t quite that bold. Instead, I stared up at him. “Even if they had to heal at a human’s rate, eventually the pain would be gone and they might forget the lesson.”

He twitched his head in a quick shake. “I would make it severe,” he whispered. “It would not be gone any time soon.”

Oh dear. His honor was more wounded than I’d realized. But I’d started down this path, and I had to push through it. I refused to accept a reality where I had to watch someone get beaten half to death for something they did to me... especially when they were interrupted and I was, essentially, unharmed.

This was a time for boldness. I touched the top of his hand. Heat from his skin engulfed mine, just as it had in his drekkan form. The warmth was such a stark contrast to the dank chill around us that it distracted me. He seemed so cold and unfeeling—as both a drekkan and an elf—but his hand warmed me from my fingertips straight to my heart.

He turned his head down to look at my hand. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist—at least the top half. They didn’t quite reach all the way around. My stomach lurched—I hadn’t felt so nervous in... longer than I could remember.

He offered me a cautious smile and whispered, “Tell me your thoughts, Champion of Fae and Elven Fools.”

Was that a compliment or insult?

I couldn’t tell, but I whispered back. “Or, you could claim their debt. Allow them to leave with nothing more than the fear and humiliation they have already experienced... *and* the knowledge that *they owe you*. You might call in that debt next week or next year. You might call in a partial payment in two months and let the rest linger over their heads, constantly reminding them that their debt to you is as great as their lives—that they owe you every day, every moment, that they draw breath.”

One corner of his mouth lifted in a dangerous smile. “Some might argue the mental anguish of your consequence is more cruel than the physical torture of mine.”

“You could always give them the choice.” I immediately regretted the words as soon as I spoke them, but the damage was done. I saw the glint in

his eye as he contemplated making them choose the nature of their own torture.

I only hoped they chose my version. They both reminded me of Alastor. My brother would never torture another person like they'd attacked me, but he'd made decisions just as rash and reckless many times... and I knew I would see my brother in them as I heard their screams.

The Elf King patted my hand on his wrist, and then nudged me to his side.

I let go of him, and he waved a hand at the two elves on the floor. They lifted their heads and shoulders off the ground, but stayed kneeling.

"Your crimes," the king drawled, "include attacking someone who could not defend herself and violating the trust inherent in our kingdom that allowed you entrance into the dungeons. In that violation, you brought dishonor on me, forcing me into the unenviable position of having lied."

As he spoke they both paled. They'd already heard us discussing everything, but kneeling at the feet of the king who threatened their lives seemed to make reality even more harsh.

The king continued. "In discussing a plan with the one wronged to encourage you to avoid these mistakes in the future, I have decided to offer you a choice. You may choose to pay for your crimes with your flesh —"

He smacked the whip handle against his hand. "Right here, right now, or..." He smacked the whip again. "You may choose to leave this dungeon knowing you owe me a debt for these crimes... and I will collect it whenever I choose."

Well. He certainly knew how to make their circumstances sound dismal. A heavy silence fell on all four of us. Nobody spoke for a solid minute. Maybe even two.

Awkward.

Finally, the darker-haired elf dropped his face back to the floor and spoke with his eyes buried. "I'm so sorry, Your Majesty. It was one of the worst mistakes we've ever made, and I'll never do anything like it again. I would

gladly accept your second offer, and I would thank you for it every day you allowed me.”

High King Aedan waited until the elf on the floor stopped speaking and lifted his head back up for an answer. “Do you have anything to say to the fae?”

What? I turned to the king and pulled my jaw back closed. He just tipped his head down toward the kneeling elf.

My tormenter from earlier turned to me and spoke slower. “I apologize for attacking you. It was not honorable, and I... I regret it. I...” He glanced at the king, and then turned back to me. “I also thank you for your generous response. It... was more kind than we deserved.”

I nodded to him.

The king spoke slowly with a small rumble in his throat, almost as deep as when he was a drekkan. “Jolter. Your apologies and choice to remain in my debt are acceptable.”

After Jolter thanked him, the king turned to the blonder elf. “Koan, what is your choice?”

Grim lines drew his expression down. “I am also sorry, High King. I would prefer to be in your debt as well, and I hope you will someday be pleased with my work.”

He did not wait for a prompting to speak to me. “I, too, am sorry for how we treated you and appreciate your grace. I...” His eyes darted to the king, but only for a moment. “I would like to attempt a degree of recompense by protecting you while you are here.”

My brows shot up, and he explained more. “There are a lot of people who are... worried about a fae being here, in Sirun. People do stupid things when they worry, and the king can’t make you safe all the time. But I could spend most days as a bodyguard. Even if you’re in the dungeon—”

The king cut him off. “She will not remain in the dungeon. That was a poor choice on my part, and I will not risk her safety here again.”

Oh?

“Soooo,” the young man—elf—asked me, “would you let me help keep you safe?”

“I could help too!” Jolter seemed almost jealous that he hadn’t thought of the idea. “Nobody would bother you with both of us around.”

Koan shot Jolter a glare, and then raised his brows toward me. I didn’t really like the idea. They both seemed penitent, but I didn’t trust them at all.

Did I trust the king? Drekkan by day and elf by night?

All that I could trust about him was that he had a distinct sense of honor and justice—it had shown itself in both of his forms. And he had promised me safety unless Alastor returned. I could convince myself to trust that one thing because it was so tied to his stringent honor.

“So be it.” He interrupted my thoughts by deciding the matter for me. “You may guard the door to her room.”

I crossed my arms. He shouldn’t get to decide things like this for me.

Before I had time to say anything, he spun around and swept down the dungeon hall. When nobody else moved, he paused and waved at me. “Come.”





CHAPTER 4: AEDAN

The half-fae, half-human rushed to keep up with me. She didn't walk at my side, but she didn't walk behind me either—more like half a step behind me while mostly at my side.

The twins actually dedicating any of their time to her safety would solve several problems at once. They would finally be occupied with something they considered important that didn't annoy me, and she... she would be safer. Despite their frequently obnoxious behavior, the two elves were generally popular and well-liked. Having them on her side would go a long way to discouraging others from tormenting her.

My next announcement should help as well.

A few moments before we reached the dining hall, she gasped and stopped abruptly. She clutched a hand to her chest, but I did not sense any pain or fear. "What is it?" I asked.

She rubbed her chest slowly. The effects of the magic-cancelling cuffs should be wearing off, but they should not have hurt her.

Of course, I'd thought that about another fae once too.

"I..." She tipped her big, blue, vulnerable eyes up at me. "I..." She blinked twice and shook her head. "It's nothing. Where are we going?"

I started walking again. If she would not be forthright with me, I needed to take care of business. “To the dining hall. I’m going to introduce you better than I did this afternoon.” I tried to gauge her reaction without staring at her. She hadn’t said ten words since we’d left the dungeon, but she had been extremely bold and verbose while we’d been down there.

She was unpredictable, and I didn’t like that. She also challenged my decisions and authority, and I didn’t like that either.

And she was fae, a fact that I disliked more than any other. It made everything she said duplicitous, and I was not accustomed to tracking so many hidden meanings.

I needed to remind myself of all those reasons when her blue eyes tugged on my emotions. I only promised her safety if her brother stayed away, and I could not let any lovely eyes create feelings that might compromise those conditions.

I took her through the side door that opened to a small anteroom. A curtain separated us from the back of the raised dais in the dining hall. The dull pulse of dozens of conversations thrummed against the fabric, announcing hundreds of diners still enjoying merry company.

“Come,” I told her just before sauntering through the curtain’s opening and strolling past my table to the front of the dais. Mylo, Fagan, and Aunt Acantha still sat there talking, but they—and every other elf in the hall—silenced themselves, rose, and bowed as I approached the edge of the raised platform.

My impertinent prisoner stood behind me. I stepped to the side and gestured for her to move forward.

Her body stiffened, but she shifted next to me. Some three hundred faces stared at her with varying degrees of horror, anger, and hatred. A handful might have been curious, but there was nothing friendly in them.

I projected my voice magically, letting it carry a deep, serious tone to every ear without losing any potency from yelling. “Elves of Sirun. This fae is here under my protection. If you are concerned about her behavior,

you may come see me, but if any of you take it upon yourself to make her uncomfortable or afraid, you will suffer my wrath.”

I passed my gaze from table to table, watching for anyone who might want to argue with me. I saw plenty of scowls and glares at her, but nobody looked like they would violate my instructions.

Satisfied that I would not be made a liar again, I waved my hand at them, returning them to their meals. I intended to sit down at my table again, but my prisoner rushed past me in a blur of blue skirts. She parted the curtains behind us and disappeared.

I dropped a sigh. She’d already become far more work than I’d anticipated when I freed her brother.

Mylo stood up. “Rest, Your Majesty. I’ll watch her.”

I trusted Mylo, but I needed to put the fae somewhere still. And I was curious why she’d just run away.

I gestured Mylo back to his chair. “I’ll need your help with her tomorrow. I can take care of her tonight.”

He sat down, and I slipped through the curtain.

I found her on the other side of the anteroom, sitting on the floor, with her back against the door and her head buried between her arms and her knees.

She wiped her face and looked up when I entered the room.

Wiped her face? What was this? Was she crying? But I hadn’t felt any pain...

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, standing up and taking a deep breath. “I couldn’t stay out there a second longer.”

Nothing bad had happened. Nobody even protested my announcement. “Why not?”

Her face morphed with incredulous surprise. “Why not? Did you not see your own people? They all hate me!”

She was not hurt at all then, only... distraught.

She shook her head. “You should have warned me. Told me that I would never have a friend again. That everyone here would hate me just for being part fae.” She narrowed her eyes. “It’s a ridiculous thing to hate a person for, you know. We look exactly the same. If you hadn’t told everyone I was fae, they would have assumed I was an elf.”

“Would you have preferred that?” I asked. “To masquerade as an elf and hide your true identity?”

She sniffed and tugged on a reddish-blond lock of hair that had fallen in front of her shoulder. “No, I’d rather be known for who I am.”

That was a relief. Anyone who would prefer the deception she’d hinted at could not be trusted. Or perhaps she knew I wouldn’t trust that kind of dishonesty, so she changed her answer.

I shook my head. I wasn’t going to trust her anyway, so it didn’t matter.

But that didn’t change the fact that I didn’t like seeing her stressed.

“If I had warned you of how my people feel about fae earlier, when we were in the meadow with your brother, would it have changed your mind about coming here? Would you have left your brother with me and embraced the freedom of walking away from us?”

She pursed her lips, shook her head again, and pulled harder on that unfortunate lock of hair. “No,” she said. “I would have made the same choice.”

“Then nothing has changed, and I am growing hungry.” I nodded at the curtain. “Come.”

She folded her arms. “No, I’m not going back out there. And I won’t keep following you around like an eager puppy every time you say, ‘Come.’” She exaggerated all her features and mimicked my voice with that last word, like she was mocking me.

Mocking me after all the trouble I had gone through this evening to protect her! I pressed my rising anger down, refusing to allow even smoke to escape my skin.

Instead, I stepped closer to her, looming over her while she pressed her back against the wall. “Oh, really?” I whispered through gritted teeth as I set my hands on the wall next to her shoulders. “You won’t?” Did she not realize that I expected my own people to follow me if I commanded them to?

“No!” she whispered in a rush. “I won’t.” She stared up at me, ignoring the way my arms caged her to the wall. Her bold defiance filled the tiny space between us, pounding on my blood, screaming that I must insist on the respect a king deserved.

She did not drop her gaze, but her breaths sped up as a rush of terror rolled through the bond.

Ashes and flames. If I didn’t have the cursed mistek bond, I wouldn’t have known she was scared.

Well, her near-panting might have hinted at it.

But the fire in her eyes and the passion in her voice did not. She poked a finger into my chest. “It’s demeaning and cruel and, regardless of your short temper, I don’t think you want to force me to accept orders that are degrading.”

I took two steps back, and her anxiety lessened.

Burning ashes and flaming rivers. I hated the relief I felt when my actions made her fear subside. I was a king! Fair and impartial, swift to justice and... and apparently subject to fae manipulation.

“No,” I said, reeling from her insults to my position. “I do not want you to feel degraded, but I am the High King. I give instructions, and my people follow them. And that includes you now.”

The skin around her eyes tightened and the anxiety I’d sensed moments ago burst to life again. “You may be the High King,” she whispered, “but you don’t have to be heartless. You’re not a monster. Rulers can be compassionate.”

I gripped the sword hilt that hung on my waist. I was not heartless, but I was a monster. My iron-fisted control was the only way to protect my

people.

But she would never understand that. She wanted to spare punishments and allow second chances. Probably even third and fourth chances. A leniency that would inspire assassins and corrode my kingdom.

No, I could not explain myself in a way she would understand. It was the burden of kings to accept the incorrect judgment of others. So I clenched my teeth and told her, “Come.”





CHAPTER 5: CALLISTA

He did it again.

Come.

Oh, I wanted to squirt lemons in his eyes every time he said that.

But I trusted his honor more than any other elf in his kingdom, so I followed him. He had upheld that honor, protecting me when it was inconvenient and not hurting me when I argued with him. His honor might be the one thing that kept me alive now.

And he didn't return to the Dining Hall.

He clipped through the stone corridors and up spiraling staircases twice as fast as I would have liked. He probably wanted to get rid of me. Was he still mad at me? I had definitely managed to poke his temper, but I did not feel bad about it—his arrogance and ego still needed to deflate.

Unless...

What if kings were meant to be arrogant? Perhaps knowing their people depended on them bred a sort of self-importance that I just hadn't encountered yet.

I shook my head and rubbed my chest again. Motab had told me the ability to see magic was rare, but it had never bothered me until today. Now, the

magic that bound me to the king looked like a string emerging from my chest... and the sight of it made my chest itch. I was almost tempted to ask for the magic-voiding shackles again, just so I didn't have to look at it.

But, no. I couldn't block my magic sight. My ability to see magic was my best hope for finding Motab.

The king stopped in front of a door and opened it.

I had been so preoccupied with thoughts of magic and Motab that I hadn't noticed the carpets, drapes, and tapestries that decorated this hall. I peeked into the room he'd opened. Opulent rugs covered the entire stone floor and tasteful furniture matched more drapes.

I pulled my gaze out of the room and asked the king, "Where are we?"

A corner of his mouth twitched somewhere between a smile and a smirk as his grim, low voice answered. "I have decided to contain you in a room."

I nearly clapped, but instead clasped my hands together while a wide smile scrawled across my face. This absolutely made up for not warning me about his people's dislike of fae.

I tried to restrain my excitement at not living in the dungeon, but it leaked out anyway. I'd never practiced restraining emotions before. "Thank you. I promise to stay inside until you give me permission to leave."

I ran into the room without waiting for him to answer. We didn't need to even see each other anymore. I could live happily in this room, and he could go do all his kingly drekkan duties with his frosty glares, intense magic, and monster muscles.

He said something about a washroom and sitting space before he left and closed the door. I hardly listened. I spread my arms and spun in a circle. I was so giddy at the prospect of being a *prisoner* in a room fit for a princess that I twirled over and over, faster, and faster, until the movement made me light-headed. I angled myself so I collapsed on the most comfortable bed I'd ever touched in my life.

I lay on a soft comforter and stared at the layers of drapes while I caught my breath. I wasn't normally so dizzy, but this entire day had been

unusual.

And I hadn't eaten since breakfast.

A pang of hunger emphasized the point, but I didn't have food. Maybe I should have taken something when the king told me to?

No, I did not want to eat in front of all his horrible, prejudiced elves.

I reached into my deep right-hand pocket and pulled out the little book I'd been reading earlier today, before everything changed. *Winter Birds* by *Conrad Blackwater*. My heart tightened a little, like it always did, when I saw my father's name on one of his books, but I pushed the pain aside with the comfort that he'd left so many pieces of himself behind for us. He was still a small part of my life, even if it was only in the books he'd written.

My fingers tightened on the pages. If I was going to live here for the rest of my life, this book would be the only one I could touch that he'd also touched. I breathed in a slow, deliberate breath. Perhaps loving the same sorts of books he had loved could remind me of him. I'd seen a bright red bird early this morning and wanted to figure out what it was called. I returned to the pages in front of me, looking for a similar image to the one I held in my memory. I hadn't had time to find the mystery bird before I'd felt a slip of my brother's magic, like a summons, and followed it until—

A quick, but polite knock interrupted my thoughts. How long had I been reminiscing? Long enough for the king to eat and come back? Maybe, but not likely. And would he knock?

I carried my little book to the door, but then I paused. Did I really want to see anyone in this castle?

I debated with myself when a friendly voice called out, "We've brought food, but if you don't want our company we can just leave it with you."

Curious, I opened the door. Standing there with broad smiles, fresh clothes, and two giant trays loaded with meats, breads, green beans, fruit, and things I didn't even recognize were the two elves who had gone out of their way to torment me earlier. Why would *they* bring me food?

I raised a brow. "Is it poisoned?"

“No.” The blond one laughed and shook his head. “We may not be Sirun’s best citizens, but we’re not murderers.”

“Besides.” The darker-haired one shot a glare at the first. “We promised we’d protect you. We’re not liars either.”

I couldn’t remember their names. I tipped my head to try to decide if they spoke the truth, but the food’s aroma drew my attention back to it. I pursed my lips. “What is your intention here?”

“Well, we’re hungry too,” the first said. “If you’re not opposed to the idea, we thought we’d eat with you.”

I opened the door farther and tucked my book back in my pocket. I doubted they’d risk their king’s anger again, and I did want to eat.

Then again, the king was not here. Would anything hold them to their promises from earlier?

“Thanks.” The blond one led the way through the door. He whistled a low, impressed call as his eyes swept around the room. “The queen’s quarters.” He turned his gaze to me. “How did you manage that?”

The queen’s quarters? I raised a brow. Was he making this up? Another joke for his entertainment at my expense?

His look turned more sincere. “You didn’t know, did you?”

I shook my head, hoping my ignorance did not invite him to embarrass me further.

He strolled to a door across from the bed and opened it into a lavish sitting room. He waved his hand, and light rushed to the ceiling like a floating lamp. “My lady,” he called with an extravagant bow as he held the door open. “Allow me to show you the rest of your quarters.”

My two guests arranged the food on a table and waited for me to sit before they pulled chairs up for themselves and started eating.

I stared at the food, still unsure if I trusted the two men—elves—in front of me. Motab and Alastor could both enchant food and other items with little effort. If these elves could do the same—

“You still don’t trust us?” the blonder elf asked. “Even though we’re eating it right in front of you?”

The other elf groaned. “Koan, don’t goad her. The king said he didn’t even know if she needed food. She is fae, remember?”

“Half fae,” I corrected, repeating Koan’s name in my mind. “But what did you mean by that?”

A deep blush ran up the sides of the elf’s neck, and he dropped his gaze to the table. “Apologies, My Lady. I wasn’t trying to mock you. We just didn’t know how often fae—or half fae—like to eat.”

I pursed my lips and tried to think, but they stopped eating and waited for me to answer. The quiet unnerved me. “I am extremely hungry,” I admitted, “but I think it is more likely that you two are trying to poison me than feed me.”

Koan laughed. “Direct, aren’t you?”

The other elf smirked, rolled his eyes, and picked up a tiny loaf of bread before muttering, “I’ll let the laughing kea over there convince you.”

Koan tossed a grape in his mouth. “Thanks, Jolter.” *Jolter*. That was the dark-haired elf’s name. Koan turned to me. “Why do you think we want to poison you?”

I raised my chin. They might be stronger, faster, and more magical than me, but I refused to be intimidated. Or rather, I refused to show it. I was no longer chained, but if these two elves wanted to hurt me, no dungeon bars separated us here. “You had no problems with attacking me in the dungeon. You only stopped when the king burst in. You’ve found me unprotected again and hungry. Why wouldn’t you take advantage of that?”

“Ah,” Koan said as he smiled and leaned closer to me. “Because of a tiny detail you’ve left out. You see, our opinions on the entertainment value of threatening powerful, but temporarily vulnerable, half-fae have changed considerably in the last hour.”

Could he be serious? “And why is that?”

He waved a hand toward me in a grand gesture. “Because *someone* from that very particular demographic went out of her way to protect us.” He tossed another grape in his mouth and pointed at me again. “Your turn. Why would you argue in our favor against *the king* when he was clearly protecting you from us?”

I eyed his grapes, and he set the bowl of them in front of me. I stared at them. He cracked a lop-sided grin and slowly lifted a grape from the bowl to his mouth, keeping his eyes and that mischievous smile glued to my face.

I picked up a grape and rolled it between my thumb and forefinger, shifting my gaze from Koan to the piece of fruit. “You remind me of my brother,” I said, not lifting my eyes from the grape. Alastor would never poison someone, even someone he hated or feared. He would tease and taunt, though probably not as violently as these two had. But if they had anything in common with my brother, they wouldn’t pretend to be my friends while deliberately poisoning me.

I lifted my eyes to Jolter. He acted as light-hearted as Koan, but he also carried a more mature air, like an undercurrent that ran hidden by the more jovial surface waves.

He answered my unspoken questions. “Truly. The food is safe. Think of it as a peace offering. The king actually suggested we bring it to you. He said even fae need to eat eventually.”

I set the grape in my mouth and chewed it slowly. It had to be the sweetest, most perfect grape I’d ever eaten. If I was to live with elves for the rest of my life, I couldn’t spend the entire time suspicious of every scrap of food—especially if it was to be this delicious.

And if I died from this meal, at least my mouth would be happy.

Koan handed me a cracker he’d just finished spreading with cheese. I took it and nodded my thanks. He raised a similar cracker to mine, like a celebratory drink, and I returned the gesture. As our crackers touched over the bowl of grapes, he grinned and said, “To a little more trust between elves and fae.”

Jolter leaned in and tapped a piece of rolled ham on a skewer against our crackers. “To food that brings people together!”

“Hear, hear!” Koan laughed and looked at me expectantly.

I grinned back at them. “To spur-of-the-moment, life-changing choices. May they all bring us more good food than we expect!”





CHAPTER 6: AEDAN

I appreciated the sun's late rising in winter more since I'd borne the drekkan curse—it gave me a few extra minutes as an elf every morning, and—like every chance I had—I wanted to use those moments to see if I could find anything new on fae curses in my library.

Before I found any hidden books that might tell me how to free my people, a loud groan caught my attention.

“Oh, no. Don't give her that one.”

“Why not? It has more current and detailed information than any other.”

“It's the most boring thing I've ever read.”

“She *asked* for history. It's not like she was hoping to be entertained.”

I paced toward the argument as fast as I could. Those two voices belonged to Koan and Jolter, and I couldn't think of any good reason for them to be touching my books.

When I rounded the twenty-foot-high wall lined with bookshelves that they argued behind, I saw them both with an armful of books. Koan dropped his books as he lunged at a volume that Jolter held just out of his reach. They fell on top of each other right in front of me.

Jolter noticed me a moment later, kicked Koan, and hissed, “King!” Both of them rolled over to their knees and bowed their heads.

I surveyed the books they’d dropped and splayed all over the floor. “What are you doing? In. My. Library.”

Koan tipped his head up with all the entitled arrogance he usually wore. “I thought you invited everyone in.”

I tightened my control on the anger that wanted to burn these two. I did not need my own heat to light my books on fire. “*Everyone* who wants to *read*.”

Jolter side-eyed his brother and dipped his head toward me again. “Your Majesty, Callista asked us to bring her some reading material. We thought it was a harmless request since she’ll be trapped in that room for the rest of her life.”

“Callista?” Was that—

“Your *prisoner*,” Koan answered. “She’s harmless, you know, and letting her read a little won’t hurt anything.”

I ground my teeth as my brain tried to make sense of their discombobulated answers. “My prisoner asked you to bring her books?”

“History, specifically,” Koan said with an eye roll.

“She likes it,” Jolter said defensively.

“Well, *Solantum* will cure her of that,” Koan muttered.

I strode around them and picked up Solantum’s Recent History of Hemlit. It was the only book I knew of that discussed my parents’ policy on Hemlit’s isolation. No fae needed to know about that. I looked at the other titles on the floor. More history titles. More information on my people. More knowledge I could not risk handing to potential enemies.

She’s not your enemy. Something in my brain protested the label, but I knew what her kind had done to me. *She’s only here because of you,* my mind argued again. *She would have gone home if you’d let her.* But I’d let a fae hurt the people of Hemlit enough. I could not risk any more. Even

Koan and Jolter's persistent juvenile behavior could be attributed to my curse.

I shook my head. "Do not give her any history books." Their shocked expressions hit me like a judge's verdict. *Guilty. Cruel. Monster.*

Koan spoke with a rare sincerity and solemnity. "But, Your Majesty, she's asked for so little."

A heat ran through my veins. I needed to leave the castle before I shifted. "Give her art supplies. Or a nature book. Or anything that does not include information on how to destroy us." I needed to keep Solantum's volume in a safer place, but the fire under my skin ticked like a bomb. I had to leave. I shoved the book toward Jolter. "Have this delivered to my room." I waited until he met my eyes. "It will be your death if it is not in my room tonight."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I gripped both their shoulders and hauled them to their feet. "My prisoner is to be protected. I want her safe, not educated. She does not need to know our history, our magic, or how our kingdom works. Can you two remember that?"

They nodded slowly, wincing from the heat in my hands. "Can you?!" I didn't have time for their frivolity.

"Yes!" they screeched, scrambling away from me.

"Good," I hissed at them. "And remember—you still owe me."

Their faces turned down in anxious shadows. The fae had been right. A perpetual threat over these two was far more effective than a painful beating—and she hadn't even tried to hide her capacity for manipulation when she'd suggested it. But I didn't have time to linger—the heat in my blood was now crescendoing. I spun and raced to the garden in the back courtyard where I usually changed into a drekkan.





CHAPTER 7: CALLISTA

I strummed the lute Koan and Jolter had brought me a few days ago. The tips of my fingers were too sore to attempt any more chords, but I didn't have anything else to do. The brothers had promised they'd bring me more things tomorrow. I'd spent some time looking out the window—my room was in one of the towers—but once the sun set, the air was far too cold to keep the shutters open, even with a blanket wrapped around myself.

That left me with my little bird book and the lute.

A scream tore through the hall outside my door. I ran to the door, lute still in hand, and almost tripped over my own feet trying to move so quickly. I flung the door open and took in a scene of chaos.

Koan held a very young elf, a small child, who screamed like he was missing an arm. He was loud enough that none of them could have heard me open my door. The boy twisted and writhed and threw his weight so that he could grab Koan's hand... and then the child bit Koan.

Koan flung the toddler off himself and yelled something unintelligible. The child would have hit the ground head-first, but Jolter leaped closer and caught him just in time. The boy started shrieking again, and Jolter set him down and darted back. The boy turned and ran down the hall, away from my room, in a direction I'd never been.

“Stop!” “No!” Koan and Jolter both yelled at the child and jumped in front of him, cutting off his access to the hall.

Koan reached for the boy but then withdrew his hand, muttering something about half-sized villains. The boy started screaming something I couldn’t make out while trying to worm his way past Koan and Jolter, who darted in front of him every time he tried to run down the hall.

I didn’t know why they were trying to block him, but they were doing it all wrong. A small child needed someone to distract him, not fight him. I glanced at the lute in my hand. Maybe that would work.

I pinched my thumb and forefinger together and strummed back and forth across the strings hard and fast with my nails. I didn’t know how to play a lute, but the sound echoed against the stone walls and caught the attention of all three elves.

I repeated the strumming and locked eyes with the boy. I changed the rhythm of my strumming, then plucked the chanterelle string a few times, and then strummed twice more. The boy turned and faced me.

Koan and Jolter looked at each other and froze, probably guessing at what I was trying.

I raised a brow while I held the boy’s lively brown eyes with mine and strummed a few more times. I was no musician, but the sounds seemed to be working. “Have you ever played a lute?” I asked.

He didn’t answer, but he did start walking closer to me.

I sat down just inside my room and plucked a few more strings while he worked his way closer to me. Koan and Jolter moved like a hesitant wall a few feet behind him, clearly hoping to catch him if he bolted again.

But he waddled right up to me and stretched an arm out. I strummed across the strings with my thumb and then offered the boy my hand. He placed his hand in mine, and I guided his fingertips across all the strings. He grinned, pulled his hand out of mine, and clumsily strummed on his own.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Jor Jor,” he answered as his fingers grew more confident and wrapped around the strings.

I carefully unwrapped his fingers and used both my hands to splay his fingers and strum more gently. “Jor Jor, we want to be careful when we play the lute. Like this.”

“Jorlan,” Koan said softly. The boy didn’t even glance at him. “His name is Jorlan. He doesn’t really talk, and I don’t know how much he understands. But sometimes he runs off. His parents are probably frantic about him missing right now.”

I helped Jorlan isolate one finger to pluck with while turning a wry smile up at Koan. “I don’t think you’ll survive taking him anywhere.”

He huffed. “No, I wouldn’t dare try that again. He likes you well enough though.”

I shook my head. “I’m not leaving this room without permission. Maybe you could bring his parents up here?” I tipped my head toward the center of my room. “I bet he’d follow me in and then we could close the door so he doesn’t run off.”

“No.” Koan still spoke softer than normal, as if he was afraid of spooking Jorlan. “His parents would kill you if they thought you’d trapped him in there with you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I keep forgetting that I’m an evil fae.”

“You shouldn’t joke about things like that,” Jolter whispered. “Someone might overhear and assume the wrong thing.”

I sighed. “So what’s your plan?”

The two brothers looked at each other. “We don’t have one,” Jolter admitted. “Maybe I’ll go look for his mother and Koan can stay here with you.”

“The little stinker hates me,” Koan grumbled.

I glared at him.

“What?” he hissed.

“You know what,” I answered. “If he doesn’t like you, it’s because you say things like that.” I wrapped an arm around the boy who was now tapping the body of the lute like a drum. “Jorlan is a wonderful boy, and I’m glad he came to meet me.”

Koan rolled his eyes and plopped himself down in the middle of the hallway, a solid ten feet away from us.

Jorlan found the lute so fascinating that we sat and played with it for almost half an hour. Every few minutes I shifted the instrument so he could explore another sound or shape on it. He tried plucking one string at a time, then each string, then different combinations of them. He drummed on every surface of the body.

I did have to stop him from adjusting the tuning pegs, but once he realized they were off limits, he explored the rest of it with more focus than I would have guessed a child his size was capable of.

Koan sat in the hall like a bored guard, but he couldn’t trick me anymore. I saw the sobriety behind his levity. Jorlan might annoy him, but he wouldn’t risk letting the boy get hurt.

Eventually, a dull thunder rolled down the corridor. I stayed behind my door frame, but my stomach started to tighten when the noises approaching us sounded like dozens of angry conversations.

Finally, a woman—elf—strode into my view. “Jorlan!” she cried.

The boy looked up, dropped the lute on the ground next to me, and ran to her arms. “Mar Mar!” he sang as she picked him up. She dropped a quick kiss on his head and then passed him into the crowd of elves behind her.

She turned and faced me, spreading her arms and gathering an eerie green magic fluid into her hands. It looked like a cross between a poison and liquid fire, but it coalesced out of nothing. Venom dripped from her voice as she hissed at me. “You!”

I stood and clutched the lute to my chest. It made a pitiful shield.

“Woah, woah, woah!” Koan’s light-hearted, nearly laughing voice intercepted her as he spread his arms and stood directly in front of her. “Lady Carmine, let’s calm down before anyone does something we’ll regret. You heard the king’s announcement about her, right?”

Jorlan’s mother practically yelled. “It won’t matter. When the king finds out what she’s done, he’ll be glad that I disposed of her.”

Koan’s humor disappeared. “She did nothing wrong.”

“She certainly won’t do anything more when I’m done with her.”

“Lady Carmine!” Koan sounded more anxious now.

She lowered her voice, but her menace doubled. “Step aside, Koan, and I’ll ignore the fact that you allowed her to capture my son—”

A flaming streak of lightning rushed along the ceiling, starting from the end of the corridor where the crowd had come from and sparking all the way to the other end of my vision. Lady Carmine’s burning magic shrank into small handfuls of green terror while the crowd’s murmurs disappeared.

The air shifted as people made way for a new elf. The raw power that he dropped as he walked down the hallway identified him long before I saw him—even the shadows fled from his approach.

Aedan, the High King of Hemlit, strode down the hall with all the terrifying majesty I would have expected from someone who owned that title. He finally stopped next to Koan, who dropped into an elegant bow at the waist.

The king nodded to Koan and turned toward Lady Carmine, leaving his back inches from my face. Lady Carmine’s magic blinked out as she clenched her fists and curtsied.

“The public is not welcome in this tower,” the king said. His voice carried on magic like a low growl to everyone in the hall.

“Your Majesty,” Lady Carmine started. She stopped when he tipped his head toward her. I imagined him turning the same steely gaze I’d seen him focus on Koan and Jolter to this woman, and I almost felt sorry for her.

She dipped her head. “Your Majesty, may I explain what happened?”

“Is it necessary to waste my very limited evening time with an explanation of an invasion of my privacy?”

She lifted her gaze. “I believe it is, Your Majesty.”

He lowered his tone even more, though he still projected it with magic through the entire hall. “Then make it brief.”

She curtsied quickly and launched into an explanation. “The fae creature behind you lured my son into her room. We only found him because Jolter brought us news of her crimes. If we hadn’t arrived when we did... I can’t imagine what cruelty she had planned for him.”

A few feet behind her, at the front of the crowd, Jolter raised his eyes to the king and shook his head. Any sympathy I’d had for Lady Carmine evaporated when she added, “I’d like to destroy the fae before she has time to hurt or endanger any of the other children in Sirun.”

“Before anyone gets *destroyed*,” the king said dryly, “I’d like Koan to tell us what he knows about the events you described.”

Koan dipped his head again and, with an unusual degree of solemnity, said, “My brother and I were guarding the hall when Jorlan came running through it. We suspected he’d run up here without anyone knowing, and we didn’t want him to get out the door at the top of the tower. But when we tried to pick him up or block him, he screamed and attacked us. We were having a hard time stopping him.”

He dipped his head toward the king. “The fae behind you heard the noise and opened her door. She never set a foot outside the door frame, but she showed Jorlan the lute she’s holding. He sat and played with her and the lute, in the *entrance where she’s standing*, while Jolter found Lady Carmine. When she arrived, her son dropped the lute and ran to her.”

Koan glanced at the crowd, and then focused on the king again. “I was here the whole time. She was more kind and patient with the boy than I would have been.” Koan felt more like Alastor every moment I knew him, but with a deeper knowledge of Sirun. He’d predicted Jorlan’s mother’s response perfectly.

The king nodded at Koan and stepped to the side, exposing me to Lady Carmine again. Her eyes flitted between me and the king, as if wondering exactly what she was allowed to do to me.

But instead of addressing her, the king raised a hand toward me, inviting me out of my room. He kept his hand raised until I stood next to him. He almost rested his hand on my shoulder, but instead dropped it to his side.

Then he turned to the angry elf in front of me. “Lady Carmine, do you have any evidence that she lured your son here with the intent to harm him?”

Lady Carmine lifted her chin at me. “Your Majesty, Jorlan was sitting next to her when we arrived. That’s all the evidence we need—”

Koan cut her off and pointed at me. “She might have saved your son’s life! Have you seen the other side of the door at the end of this corridor?!”

“Koan.” The king’s warning silenced Koan. “Lady Carmine. I will ask you again. Do you have any evidence of your accusations?”

Her eyes tightened. “No more than those I’ve shared already.”

The king’s voice hardened. “Then you owe the fae an apology. You may call her Lady Callista.” I had to hold my jaw closed. He remembered my name? And he just assigned me a noble status? He was impossible to understand. Impossible to predict. Impossible to even read. What was he thinking?

Lady Carmine fisted her dress and clenched her jaw.

“You may apologize publicly,” the king growled, “or you may report to the dungeon for a more appropriate consequence for your disobedience.”

She paled, dropped into a curtsy, and bowed her head. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I let my emotions affect my actions. It won’t happen again.”

When she stood back up, she faced me. She was not pleased, but it appeared she would take a little humiliation over a beating. “Lady Callista, I apologize for assigning you motives that I do not have proof of.” Her words might have sounded like an apology, but her eyes told a different

story. They shot invisible arrows at me that threatened very real ones if I came near her son again.

Regardless of her silent threat, I needed to respond to her spoken apology. “Thank you,” I squeaked out in a much smaller voice than I’d hoped. I swallowed and tried for a little more dignity. “I appreciate that.”

King Aedan’s low, drekkan-like voice filled the hall again. “As a reminder, Callista is under my protection. If you are upset with her behavior, come see me. Anyone who harms her can expect a much more violent justice.” He waited a few seconds while that permeated everyone’s thoughts, and then he added, “Now get out of my tower.”

Lady Carmine shot one more glare at me, and then scurried after the rest of the crowd. In seconds, only Koan and Jolter remained with the king and I.

The king tipped his head toward Koan and Jolter. “You two should go get her dinner.” As the brothers ran off, he turned to face me entirely.

I hugged the lute against my chest. What was I supposed to say to this king who marched in on chaos and used his powerful magic to scare away the elves who threatened me? Why had he done it? And why had he believed Koan over the lady?

“Why did you help the child?”

I tipped my head. Apparently he had questions too. Perhaps that was the best place to start. “Honestly, I was trying to help Koan and Jolter first. I didn’t know why they were trying to stop the boy, but they were having a hard time. And I had the lute in my hands.” I shrugged. “And then he was a sweet boy. I didn’t mind playing with him.”

The king’s bright green eyes bored into my face. “Tell me a lie.”

“What?” This elf made no sense.

His voice lowered and his gaze remained fixed on mine. “Tell me a lie.”

Why would he ask that? And could it hurt anything to indulge? “I hate lemons.” Like usual, my mouth answered before my head finished analyzing the situation.

His eyebrows wrinkled. “You hate lemons?”

“No.” I rolled my gaze to the ceiling, but that felt childish, so I met his again. “You said to tell a lie. So that was the lie.”

“So you like lemons.”

“I love lemons,” I corrected. Just thinking about them made me smile. Growing lemons might have been the only thing I was truly good at, the only thing I could confidently do without inviting chaos and disaster.

He nodded slowly.

“What’s behind the door?” I asked.

His brows raised.

“The door that Koan told Lady Carmine about. When he said I might have saved Jorlan?”

His face settled back into an impassive, unreadable expression, and then he changed the subject. “Would you have hurt the boy if you’d had the chance?”

“No! What kind of question is that?”

He didn’t answer but asked me another one. “Would you like to hurt his mother?”

“No! Why do you think I want to hurt everyone?”

“She would have hurt you.”

I tightened my hold on the lute. “She was worried. People do things...” I drifted off. I didn’t know if I had a good excuse for her or not, but I did know that hurting her back wouldn’t make me feel better.

He watched me closely. His gaze was too much—too intense, too focused, too powerful. And it mixed with a heady combination of cedar and leather. When I glanced away, he cleared his throat, and I... I brought my attention back to his green eyes.

He extended an elbow. “Will you come with me?”

He *asked* me to come. A light-hearted glee exploded in my chest. After all the times he had assumed I would just follow him, this invitation carried more meaning than it might have if he'd asked any other time. It implied a degree of acceptance and respect that I had craved since we met but had almost given up on receiving.

And now, with no clear reason, he offered it freely. I'd try to figure out why later when I was alone in my room. I shifted the lute into my right arm and slipped my left into his elbow. Like always, he radiated a heat that was comfortable and relaxing. Perhaps this life would not be so awful. I had friends in Koan and Jolter. And now the terrifying, drekkan-shifting, iron-fisted king even exhibited a degree of civility.

We walked past doors that—if Koan was to be believed—opened to the king's quarters, and then we continued to the end of the corridor and up another small set of spiral stairs.

He gestured at the door in front of us. "The door that Koan spoke of. Would you like to see the source of his concern?"

I nodded. Of course I wanted to see what he'd been talking about.

The king opened the door to a small platform, like a balcony, that barely had room for the two of us. I followed him onto it and clutched his arm tighter as a cold breeze called my attention to our precarious position. We were perched like little birds on a miniscule branch hundreds of feet above the ground. Frosty ice, a starry sky, and snowy mountains made a beautiful landscape, but all I could see was the several-hundred-foot drop that would be my death if I slipped. Or tripped. Or fell. Or...

"Are you afraid of heights?" the king asked.

The normal upright world started to tilt, as if someone thought it would be funny to turn the mountains at an angle so I wouldn't realize how far away the ground was. I closed my eyes and gripped his arm with an entirely unladylike hold, desperate to force my mind to make sense of the tipping landscape.

"I think I've just developed the fear." I hated how breathy my voice sounded, but I couldn't focus on it when my mind was growing dizzier by

the moment. And then a horrifying thought struck me. “Please don’t push me over the edge.”

Before I even finished saying the words, a warmth settled on the arm I had wrapped around the lute, the scent of cedar and leather increased, and a gentle pressure nudged me backward. “Step slowly,” he said, guiding me away from a beckoning icy death.

When the cold wind disappeared from my face, I opened my eyes. The elf king filled my vision, a striking and impossible combination of power emanating from his body while compassion and concern filled his eyes. Behind him, moonlight from the open door lit his silhouette like a glowing halo.

“Are you hurt?” His voice was more gentle than I’d ever heard it.

I blinked. Twice. And swallowed. The king I’d known until this moment had been a monster who overreacted to everything that he didn’t like. Once as a drekkan. More than once as cold and unfeeling. Now—

I didn’t know what to think. This was not monstrous behavior.

“Are you hurt?” he asked again.

“No, I—” I didn’t know what to say. I was not hurt, though. “Thank you.”

“How is it that flying did not frighten you, but this did?”

I huffed and shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe because we were moving? That was definitely the highest I’ve ever been on a platform.” A shaky breath interrupted me. “And it was a small platform.”

He tipped his head. “I did not intend to scare you. I thought you asked to see it.”

I nodded, quickly. “I did. And I’m glad you showed me. I just...” Another uneven breath. “I understand Koan’s motivation much better now. And I... I appreciate you bringing me back inside too.”

Concern filled his eyes. “I told you that you would be safe. I would never have pushed you.”

So much sincerity. This seemed like an entirely different elf than the one I'd known so far. "I believe you."

The concern vanished and he reverted back to the cold king I first saw in the dungeon. "Good. Let's get you back to your room."

He extended his polite elbow again, but instead of threading my arm through it I grabbed his wrist. "Wait!" His eyes flashed like fires, and I let go quickly. Too much. Too impulsive. We weren't friends. I was a prisoner he'd taken pity on. I could not just grab him. I had to start thinking before I acted.

His eyes tracked my offending hand as I moved it to grip the lute. When my hands stilled, he brought his gaze to my eyes. "What are we waiting for?"

"I just..." Did I dare say what I'd thought of a moment ago? It had been spontaneous like everything else I did, but what if he found it offensive? After he'd just shown me a degree of kindness I didn't think he possessed? I'd rather end on that note, even if it meant...

My mouth mutinied. "I just wanted you to know that I don't intend to hurt anyone here either. I don't have any grand plans to destroy anything, and if I could keep all your people perfectly safe, I'd do it happily. I only came into Hemlit to find my brother. And I wish you could believe that about me as well."

And since I'd said all that, I added my last thought. "It's not easy to be in a place where everyone thinks you hate them when you don't."





CHAPTER 8: AEDAN

The fae shifted from meek and terrified one moment to sharing her deepest thoughts the next. How was I supposed to know how to respond to anyone so unpredictable?

Before I had a chance to say anything, she gripped the lute with both hands and sped away from me.

I don't think you hate us.

That's what I should have said. It was obvious she didn't hate us. I could have given her that small reassurance. But instead I was too confused to respond in time. The only other people who had ever approached me with close to the same audacity were my cousins—who were all caught outside the curse—and the twins, who showed no respect unless I was threatening them.

But tonight, that had changed. Koan had shown more respect and solemnity when I found a mob in my corridor than I'd thought he was capable of. Was that this fae's work? And if so, had she cursed him or...

The other possibility left me even more confused. What if his improved behavior was simply a product of his interactions with her? What if she could somehow bring out better behavior in my delinquent young noble just by having him *guard* her room?

I was still standing in front of her door wondering when the twins returned with dinner trays. They bowed politely with their typical carefree smiles, but then Koan paused.

“Your Majesty?” he asked.

“Yes?”

“I just arranged for the kitchen to send someone up here with food for her three times a day, so that her meals aren’t delayed by changes in our schedules.”

I nodded. Thoughtful and responsible?

“Your Majesty?” Koan needed something else?

“Yes?”

“You’ll allow that, won’t you? She... Fae eat just as much as we do. It would be cruel to not—”

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. “Of course I’ll allow it. It was good of you to arrange.”

He grinned and dipped his head. “Thank you, sir!” Then he knocked on her door and disappeared inside with Jolter after she opened it.



Fagan laughed out loud. He, Mylo, and Aunt Acantha had gathered in my sitting room for our weekly discussion on the state of affairs of Sirun and ways to end our curse.

“Let me be sure I’m hearing this right,” Fagan said between chuckles.

“You’re concerned that your fae prisoner is plotting something because she’s stayed nicely in her room and Koan has developed a sense of propriety and respect over the last week?”

“And responsibility,” I added. That just set him laughing again. “His interactions with her are the only things that have changed. And he started changing his behavior the day he met her.”

Fagan collected himself and smiled at me. It was a fatherly sort of smile I was not in the mood to indulge. “Aedan, forgive an old elf for finding humor in our cursed condition.”

I couldn’t be annoyed at him after that. He was trapped farther from home than anyone else here. And that was my fault.

He sighed. “Sometimes, a simple act of kindness can wake up an elf’s desire to serve or protect or respect. And when that kindness is not deserved, it is even more potent. I suspect our young friend has simply found himself inspired and motivated to improve.”

Was Fagan talking about Koan now... or me? But he couldn’t know how the fae’s kindness to her brother had made me want to protect her since I’d met her.

“She did ask for history books,” I reminded them.

“But she didn’t complain when you refused them.” Mylo, whose personality would have made him my best friend if his position hadn’t been a soldier, leaned forward so his weight pressed his elbows into the table. “I agree with Fagan. She’s done nothing suspicious on any of the days I’ve watched her, and she’s accepted every limitation we’ve given her with grace and patience.”

Acantha shook her head, letting her black curly hair bounce around her shoulders. “She’s most likely biding her time, waiting until she has everyone’s trust. Once we all drop our guard, she will strike.”

Mylo leaned back and folded his arms. “And exactly how will she strike? What is her great, secret plan to destroy us?”

Acantha’s slender lips tightened into a thin line, and she stared at each of us before she spoke. “Most likely power. That is the motivator I have seen the most amongst fae.” She turned to me. “Perhaps she intends to kill you. Perhaps destroy the roses that strengthen you. Perhaps steal our secrets. I

can't guess at her agenda, but I will not trust her. And if her human inheritance allows her to lie, we have no weapons against her deceit."

I almost regretted telling them that she was only half fae. But these elves had been with me through my parents' deaths and the curse. I'd trusted them with nearly every secret I'd had for years.

But I hadn't told them that I'd bound her to me with a mistek bond. Or that I could sense her lies through it. Or that I knew she could lie, but she had not... except for when she told me she hated lemons.

Of all the ridiculous things to say when asked to form a lie! But then, nearly everything she'd said had surprised me every time I'd spoken to her. What would it be like to have a real conversation with her—one that wasn't overshadowed by a high stakes event? I was almost jealous of the twins' ability to casually join her for dinner so often.

What would they do if I joined them? I shook my head. They wouldn't want my company. I needed to stay separate and aloof to maintain order and safety in my kingdom anyway.

"Aedan?" Acantha had been talking, and I hadn't actually heard anything she'd said. "You shook your head. Do you disagree?"

I shook my head again. "I'm sorry, I was distracted."

"I was merely pointing out," she said with a justified look of annoyance, "that we haven't seen any fae in Hemlit for centuries. Then, a year after your parents' unexplained death, Radira—a fae—showed up and trapped us with a curse. A curse we still haven't found a way around. Now, only a decade later, two more fae show up... and one of them is inside our fortress."

"Thirteen years."

"What?" Acantha asked.

"It's been thirteen years, not ten, since the curse," I corrected. Thirteen years since I'd inadvertently killed a fae who used her dying words to separate Sirun from the rest of Hemlit and turn me into a drekkan.

“Still, my point remains. What if they worked with Radira and it’s just taken them a few years to get in here?” She cast a furtive glance in the direction of the fae’s room. “I’m not even sure our sound barrier is keeping her out of this meeting.”

“She hasn’t used any magic,” Mylo said. “I’m wondering if being only half fae limits her powers.”

Acantha shook her head. “We’ve known half fae before. They were terribly powerful. I think she wants us to believe she...” My mind drifted. Acantha had always been paranoid, and my parents’ early deaths hadn’t helped. And while she had been very helpful in setting up more security since then, I couldn’t focus on her nerves.

Not when my fae prisoner occupied so many of my thoughts.



Four hours later, I set my pen down and closed my ink jar. Since I had not been able to focus earlier, I made a list of all my distracting thoughts. I intended to burn the parchment to help purge them from my mind so I could focus on more important topics.

Instead, I read over it:

The fae’s name is Callista.

Times I felt her fear through the mistek bond:

- 1- When she was in the dungeon*
- 2- When she defied me in the anteroom*
- 3- When Lady Carmine threatened her*
- 4- When she stood on the balcony*

I can feel when she lies through the mistek bond.

She hasn’t lied.

Can she trick the bond when she lies?

Were the stories of the evils of fae nature that Acantha told me true, or were they the result of her paranoid mind?

Did Callista have any purpose in coming here besides a spontaneous decision to save her brother?

This last one was the most disconcerting. It was a question I couldn't know the answer to, but that answer determined... everything.

All my other thoughts dissipated when I considered the final question, and sequences of logic fell into place. This was the reason thoughts of the fae plagued my mind! I slammed my hands against the desk as I realized the source of my distraction. How had it taken me nearly a whole week to know why she troubled me?!

I should have realized it on the first day. I organized my life and kingdom around two guiding principles: safety for my people and honorable justice. If Callista had truly come here with no other purpose than protecting her brother, then confining her and limiting her activities was a violation of my honor and any justice that might exist in elven or human lands. If this was her only purpose, then my people's safety was not threatened—and that safety could not justify the violation of my values.

I stood up and paced to the window, staring at the dark sky but seeing nothing. My mind drifted to the last time I saw my parents, dying from an unexplained poisoning. Acantha believed it was the work of fae, but we had no proof.

No proof!

I slammed my hand against the window pane, wishing the clatter of the wood or the sting in my flesh could numb the anger I still felt, fourteen years later. Or solve the moral dilemma I now faced—should I continue to confine the fae on the other side of the wall to mitigate a potential threat that may not exist from her or should I give her more freedom, risking the dangers that Acantha had warned me about for over a decade?

Did my parents' murderer still hunt me? And was that murderer tied to Callista?

I stalked across my room and stared at the wall I shared with her. Did she even realize our rooms were connected? Did she hate me for taking away her freedom? For binding her to me?

If I only had some proof, one way or the other! I could stomach keeping her contained if it was necessary, but I hated the thought of caging someone who only wanted to help her brother—even if he had trespassed and attacked my roses. But how was I to know if she was less harmless than her brother or Radira or my parents' unknown murderer?

I leaned my forehead on the wall and pressed my palm silently against the wooden barrier. Heat rose from my anxiety into my hands. She thought it was difficult to live in a place where everyone thought she hated them, did she? Maybe it was difficult to live in a place where everyone expected you to keep them safe, but complained when you were too harsh. I pulled my magic deeper into myself and hit the wall with my hand.

A groan rose from behind the other side of the wall, and then a muffled. "Ugh. Can't you just sleep? Work off your anger issues tomorrow when you can fly around the mountains."

I hadn't planned to hit the wall, and I had definitely not expected her to respond to it. "You're awake." My voice was flat and empty. I could hardly believe she'd spoken to me like that.

A dramatic sigh answered, followed by a slightly louder, "I am now."

Not only had I caged her, I'd kept her awake with my own turbulent thoughts. Or...

Had she kept me awake by intruding into my thoughts? If that was the case, then it was most appropriate that her night be as sleepless as mine. "Can I talk to you?" I asked.

She snorted. "You already are."

"There's a door in this wall. Can I open it?" Hearing the words take up space in the dark night—and then not hearing her respond—made me realize how that request could be misconstrued.

Just as I realized how awful it might sound, she finally asked, "To what end?"

I knocked my forehead against the wall. How could I have been so brash? "To speak with you," I clarified. "That is all. I have questions, and I would

prefer not to have a wall interrupting the conversation.”

Silence again.

At least half a minute passed before her voice returned, more timid than before. “I have questions too.”

I smiled. She might be unpredictable, but Mylo was right—she had not been a difficult prisoner in any way. “Might I suggest an exchange of information and ideas, then?” I asked. “Through an opened door?”

I turned my head and pressed my ear to the wall. Sounds of shuffling blankets, footsteps, a wardrobe opening and closing, and more footsteps had me checking myself to see what I wore. A formal tunic and trousers. Perfectly appropriate.

When she softly called, “You can open the door now,” I did so quickly... and then I froze.

She had wrapped a pale blue dressing gown over whatever she was wearing to bed. It was modest and decent, but seeing her stand in it with her arms crossed and her eyes tired, made her look both beautiful and more vulnerable than any other time we’d spoken. I felt doubly cruel for everything I’d done to her, and the urge to protect the selfless goodness she offered her brother surfaced again.

I realized I was staring at her when she asked, “Do you want to start?” in a voice barely over a whisper.

I raised a brow. “Why are you whispering? We’re the only people in this tower.”

She mirrored my brow raise but managed to add a sardonic glint to it. “I suspect either Koan or Jolter is sleeping in the hall.”

“Sleeping?” I should wake them up. “They’re supposed to be guarding you, not sleeping.”

A warm smile replaced her earlier expression. “I believe they’ve set their magic to alert them if anyone enters the hall.”

The warmth in her face and voice made me jealous. What emotions played on her face when she spoke of me? But that was a line of thought I could not afford to entertain. Kings orchestrated order and safety—they did not worry about what others thought of them.

“Do you like the brothers?” I asked instead.

She nodded. “They’re sweeter than I gave them credit for when I first met them.”

I scoffed. “You mean when they attacked you in the dungeon?”

She smiled. “Yes. I’m... not mad about that anymore.”

“Because they’ve been... sweet?” That made no sense. One good deed did not make a bad one disappear.

She tightened the gown around her. “Sort of.” She must have seen my confusion because she elaborated. “I don’t think they went down there with the idea of hurting me. I think they were curious. And prone to making poor decisions without thinking through them. And they’d been told a lot of untrue things about fae in general.”

She swallowed but kept talking. “Once they realized they had hurt me, and scared me, they felt really bad, and they’ve done their best to make it up to me.”

I nodded slowly and gestured at her gown. “Did they get you clothes?”

Her eyes widened as she dragged her chin back and forth twice. “No, Your Majesty.”

My eyes narrowed. “Then who?”

Her jaw clamped closed and a fervor burned in her eyes just like when she’d stood in front of me and fought for her brother. She raised her chin and said, “I don’t think I’m going to answer that question.”

What? Why would she defy me? Heat rose in my veins and the temptation to strike her down with fire burned through me.

But I had promised her safety.

But her defiance was greater than I'd tolerate from any elf in my kingdom.

But I had promised.

I clenched my hands into fists and pushed the heat down, deeper inside my control. "Why not?" The words rumbled out, as if a drekkan inside me had taken over my voice box.

Her posture and voice exuded confidence and arrogance that would easily be cured by a few days in my dungeon, but... I felt her fear through the mistek bond. She challenged me even though it terrified her. Why?

Her words answered the question... and stunned me. "You are clearly angry about it. Arranging clothes for me was a kindness, and I will not have it rewarded with your wrath."

"You would protect... an elf from... *me*?" The idea was backwards—I protected my elves. They didn't need help from a *fae* who may or may not be connected to Radira, who may or may not have been connected to my parents' deaths.

But she nodded.

And I remembered her brother. Koan and Jolter. And now an elf she would not name. She was making a habit of sparing people my anger. A new heat rose in my chest, and it had nothing to do with my magic. It was an illogical attraction to her ability to temper my anger. It was a bravery I had not seen before, and it rose like a phoenix while her own fears burned in the background.

It was beautiful.

"Can I ask a question now?" Her voice drew my mind back to my original purpose. I'd wanted to find out her intentions here, but I'd started with a meaningless interrogation.

"Yes," I answered. She should have a question, and then I would ask one that mattered.

"Why do your people hate fae so much?" Her fear intensified as she asked the question.

That was an easy one. But first, I had to respond to her emotions. “You do not need to fear me.” Her eyebrows popped up. “I know that wasn’t your question, but I want you to know that I will keep my promise to you. I will not release my anger on you.”

She responded with a tight smile, but I felt her worry lessen.

Her question had a short answer. “My people have never trusted others, but we have a particularly upset history with fae. It was a fae that cursed me with the drekkan form and trapped our people within the barrier your brother temporarily damaged.”

Her head tipped to the side. “If you were trapped, why were you so angry that he disrupted it?”

My hands tightened into fists again. “We couldn’t *use* his damage—it had already started fixing itself before you came through it. His crimes were more than just damaging the barrier. He also trespassed, attacked my roses, and lied about his actions. I do not trust him or his motives.”

Which brought me to my question. “And I need to know what your motives are here.”

Her brows wrinkled, emphasizing the confusion in her blue eyes. “Are you asking why I’m here?”

I clenched my fists again. This was the question that everything hung on. “Yes.”

She chuckled and shook her head, as if she couldn’t believe I’d asked such a thing. “I’m here as a deterrent for my brother, a living collateral so you can ensure his behavior with my potential death. I can’t imagine why that would keep you up at night.”

I would have laughed at her snark if I didn’t need to know more. “I realize that. But is there anything else you hope to accomplish while you are here? Do you have any other plans?”

I stopped talking and held my breath. After being impressed by her kindness and attracted to her bravery, I truly hoped her motives ended with

what she'd said. I wanted to make her happy and comfortable, but I could not do it if I felt her lie now.

Her eyes skittered to the floor and her breathing sped up. The anxiety that had lessened a few moments ago burst into fear as great as when she'd breathed a terrified plea to not push her to her death.

She raised her gaze to mine. "I don't have plans, but I do have an additional hope."

Her honesty helped me relax. I breathed more easily, but her voice trembled as she said, "I don't know how it will even be possible, but I'm hoping that I can find Motab—my mother—while I'm here. Though, I'm afraid that since everyone hates fae so much, she's probably hiding or disguised."

"Your mother?" Curious. She'd managed to surprise me. In all the speculation about her secret evil plans, nobody had suggested she was looking for family. "Is she here?"

She nodded. "The last time we saw her, she was coming here for a day, but she never returned." She shrugged. "Of course, that was thirteen years ago, so I don't have high hopes, but I've seen some of her magic, which makes me hope a little..."

She drifted off as my expression contorted. I tried to keep an impassive face, but... the things she said! Thirteen years ago. A fae. Coming into Hemlit.

I forced my mind to focus on the facts. I didn't have them all yet. It could be just a coincidence.

But coincidences were for fools. I knew better.

My voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "What is your mother's name?"

The half-fae in front of me smiled and her fears almost disappeared entirely. "Her name is Radira. Radira Blackwater. Will you... look for her?"

Radira Blackwater.

A sinking feeling of horror tightened my throat.

I never knew her family name, but I would remember Radira every day for the rest of my life.

I was the one who had killed her.





CHAPTER 9: CALLISTA

The king's tone could almost have qualified for gentle and considerate... until I named my mother. The way he froze at her name left me with no doubt: he knew her.

Was she alive?

Did he know where she was right now?

Would he look for her?

As seconds passed in silence, his expression morphed from shock to horror to anger to an attempt at an impassive, unrevealing expression. Finally, he spoke through clenched teeth. "I need to finish this conversation tomorrow."

He closed the door and left me in silence.

I laid the dressing gown over a chair and crawled back in bed. What did the king know about her that turned his entire demeanor? Had she done something? Had he?

Possibilities swirled in my mind for the rest of the night. If the king had wanted to ruin my sleep, he could not have chosen a better way. At least I had the freedom to nap.

As soon as I heard birds outside the window, I climbed out of bed and put on clothes. Darkness still filled the sky, but we were in the middle of winter—I expected darkness for a few more hours. Since the birds were up, though, I might as well be too.

I cracked my door open just in time to see Koan disappear at the end of the hall. Mylo stood in front of my door and dipped his head in a polite gesture. “Can I help you?”

I nodded. “I’m afraid I woke up early and can’t sleep. I was hoping you might be willing to light my room?”

“Of course.” He offered me a kind smile and stepped closer to the room. I wasn’t sure what to think of this elf—he was loyal to his king, without doubt, but every word he’d said to me had been almost gentle. I suspected he’d throw me off the balcony if the king told him to but, unless he was instructed to hurt me, he seemed to be one of my best allies here.

He waved his hand in the doorframe, and magical light gathered into a ball in the middle of my ceiling like a hanging lantern. Just as I was about to thank him, a long shadow entered my vision.

The king stood next to Mylo in front of my door. He held a massive book and wore the same tunic he’d had on when I saw him hours ago. Had he slept in it? Or had his thoughts been as troublesome as mine?

He faced Mylo. “Is there a problem?”

“No, sir,” he said, stepping away from my door. “I was just lighting her room for her.”

The king nodded, as if approving of his soldier, and then turned to me. “Do you know anything of my parents?”

“No.” I shook my head quickly. Why did he keep asking such strange questions?

He raised a brow as if he didn’t believe me. “You’re sure?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, “but it’s possible I may have heard of them. I think...” I tried to think of everything I’d ever heard of the Hemlit royalty.

“No, if I’ve heard anything of your parents, I don’t remember it. I might have heard of your grandparents, but I’m a little unsure.”

“How are you unsure?” he asked.

“Well... my mother knew King Dustan and Queen Ember. She talked about them often enough that I remember their names. She said they’d been very kind to her when she was young. But, you’re obviously not Dustan. I don’t remember their children’s names, but I think I would have recognized them. So, I’m guessing you’re a grandchild... or else you’re not related, and you came to the throne through a challenge?”

He huffed. “Dustan and Ember were my grandparents. What do you know of them?”

I rolled my lower lip inside my teeth. I didn’t want to remember the details wrong. “It’s obviously been a long time since she mentioned them, but I think she might have lived with them for a time. I really don’t remember much besides her saying that they’d helped her, and she had information that would help them—or their son, if he was king. That’s why she set off to come here.”

Mylo’s jaw fell and his eyes widened so big I thought they might explode. The king managed to keep his face impossibly unreadable while he asked, “And is there any reason why you might want me or my parents or my grandparents hurt or killed?”

“No.” I had to fight back tears. I hated how he kept asking me this. I pushed the tears into anger. “Not unless you count imprisoning me or nearly killing my brother.”

His voice lowered to a husky growl. “And is that not enough to wish us harm?”

“No,” I whispered. “It’s enough to wish you were kind.”

He stared at me, his green eyes trying to dig out any unspoken secrets. But he wouldn’t find anything. I’d always said whatever came to my mind. If he couldn’t believe the truth, then he had bigger problems than whatever fears a half-fae-half-human might present to him.

He extended the giant volume in his hands. I looked at the book, and he waved it up and down. “Take it.”

I shifted my gaze up to him, unsure of his motives. Was it some kind of trick?

“It’s a book,” he said. “Don’t look at me like I’m trying to hurt you with it.”

But he’d been so angry the last time I’d seen him.

He’d also said he wouldn’t hurt me—at least as many times as I’d told him I didn’t want to hurt his people.

How could I expect him to believe me if I couldn’t believe him?

I took his book, clenching my teeth in case it erupted into flames.

Nothing happened.

I read the title: *Solantum’s Recent History of Hemlit*. Was he letting me read a real book after all?

Emotions swirled in my throat as he spoke. “Koan told me you wanted to read history. This is the most thorough and boring volume on the subject. I hope...” His voice caught.

I raised my gaze to his. Did I hear a break in his empty expression? A vulnerable emotion? The possibility pushed tears out of the corner of my eye. I couldn’t stop them. I couldn’t imagine what he thought he was risking by giving me decent reading material, but it felt like a peace offering—a strange extension of trust despite all the unjustified fears he had of me.

“I hope you enjoy it,” he finished. Then he glanced at Mylo. “Also, if Mylo consents to supervising you, you are free to leave the room. You can explore the tower and the main levels of the castle, or the grounds, frozen as they are. Do not go into the lower stone levels.”

My heart soared. I was allowed out of the room! I thought our conversation last night had been a disaster, but now... now I had every bit

of hope that my life in Hemlit would someday be as open and free as it had been in the hills.

Mylo looked even more surprised than I felt. The king gave me a short, jerky nod, and then strode away.

“Thank you.” I intended to call it out, as loud as his drekkan voice, so he could hear my gratitude easily, but my throat was too constricted. The words came out breathy, like I’d run across the mountains to speak them.

I didn’t think he’d heard me, and I braced to shout it louder, but he stopped. I clamped my mouth shut, nearly biting my lip. What was he thinking?

He turned slowly, and the emotions I’d first felt when he came to the dungeon returned in full force. He had more power than I’d ever felt before, but he kept it under a tight control—a control that was almost as attractive as the kindness and trust he’d just offered me.

Once he held my gaze, he spoke slowly in the same low, emotional voice. “It is my honor.” He looked at me for a few more seconds, and then marched away.

I clutched the book closer to my chest. What did he mean by it all? Did he believe I didn’t want to hurt him or his people? Had I convinced him that all fae were not evil? Why had he looked so horrified last night when I told him about my mother? And why was he being so generous now?

Mylo interrupted my thoughts. “Well, I did not see that coming.” He waved at the book. “Would you rather read or go on a tour?”

“Tour.” I did not even hesitate. “I would love to see more of the castle. Let me put this down.”

Mylo led me down several corridors and spiraled staircases I recognized from my first time on them, and then down several more until we came to a large indoor courtyard I hadn’t been to before. The walls surrounding us divided into eight different corridors. He waved toward three of them.

“Those paths will take you outside, but as it’s still cold and dark, I suggest we don’t start there.”

He ignored the hall that we came from and pointed at the next nearest tunnel to us, marked with a rose over the arching corridor. “That takes you down into the lower stone levels, so we won’t go there either.” Finally he gestured at the last three corridors. “These go to different parts of the castle. Do you have a preference?”

I studied each corridor. They were all made from stone, which made the name of the “lower stone levels” confusing, but I could ask about that later. From our vantage point, I couldn’t see anything different in the three tunnels, besides a different flower carved into the stone above each entrance. Maybe Mylo could suggest a starting point. I turned from the tunnels to him at the same time a soldier burst out of one of the paths that led outside.

“Captain!” the new soldier shouted. “We have a situation in the stables!”

I turned away to give them a semblance of privacy when a flicker of light caught my attention.

Not light. Magic.

The only fae-like power I possessed was the ability to see other magic and, like my mother’s magic had flickered in front of me when I first saw the drekkan king, fae magic now flashed at me from the hall that led to the lower levels.

The only levels I’d been forbidden.

But that fae magic was the best hint I’d had about Motab in thirteen years. And what if it didn’t linger? What if it only flickered for a few seconds? What if my mother was in some dungeon or hidden room down there? What if this was my only chance to find her?

I’d have to ask Mylo to take me. I’d plead. I’d even beg. This—

“—the fae.”

I spun toward Mylo and the soldier he’d been talking with. I’d been so distracted with the magic I’d seen that I hadn’t realized they were discussing me. I raised my brows, curious at what I’d missed.

“I’m so sorry, Callista,” Mylo said. “I need to go help with this. Will you go back to your room? I’ll come get you as soon as I can and show you the castle.”

I nodded slowly. Maybe this would work out better. I wouldn’t have to ask Mylo to betray his king. And I *would* go back to the room—right after I found out why fae magic was coming from the lower levels.

Mylo dipped his head. “Thank you, Callista.” He pointed toward my room, and a line of light raced from his hand across the ceiling of the corridor for as far as I could see. I assumed it went all the way up to my room. I started walking back, but when I heard their boots disappear down another tunnel, I turned around.

I paused in the courtyard, scanned each dark corridor for other elves, and then turned into the tunnel with fae magic flickering through its halls. The magic carried an iridescent pink hue that fizzled into purples and blues as it pulsed from deeper down the corridor. No lights, no lanterns, and no torches lit this hall, but... why would they? We were in a land where elves could summon light at will.

The fae magic provided enough light for me to see the stone hall. I wanted to run, but I did not want to slip and twist an ankle, so I just walked, following the pinks and purples and blues ahead of me.

The tunnel twisted and then dropped into a spiral staircase. I followed the pink light down the stairs... down, down, down. At least a hundred feet down. And the stairs kept coming.

The air shifted from the cool, magic-moderated temperatures above to a moist coldness that made me think I’d entered an underground cave.

The stairs finally ended and a stone tunnel, much smaller than the tunnels above, led me forward until it branched into four different paths. Only one of the options had the fae magic that I saw as a pink light, so I walked into it.

I sped up. This small diversion was taking much longer than I’d expected. It made me anxious. I didn’t want to lie to Mylo, or get him into trouble. If the king discovered I’d broken his one rule—I didn’t want to think about

the consequences. My new freedom would certainly disappear, and that was a terrifying thought.

After a few more minutes, the tunnel widened, dramatically. Instead of wet stone lining the walls, layers of roots framed the corridor. Pink magic emanated lightly from every root. I reached out and touched one. It wasn't exactly my mother's magic, but it was definitely fae. It had a vibration like my mother's and Alastor's that was completely different than all the elves' magic that I'd seen since I'd come.

Why would roots leak fae magic?

The answer had to be at the source of the light I'd been following. It had intensified, as if I was getting closer to its source.

I started walking again.

The tunnel twisted a few more times, and then opened up into an enormous cavern, easily a hundred feet tall and at least that wide. In the center, on a raised mound, a gorgeous rose bush grew in the shape of weeping willow tree. Hundreds of blossoms lighted its branches and glowed in the same pink fae magic I'd been following.

It was the rose bush.

The magic came from the plant.

Its roots trailed down the mound where it grew like a pedestal and intertwined with the walls and ceiling in a way that made me wonder if the plant was holding up the entire fortress. These roots looked strong and deep, and I couldn't see the end of any them. And the magic that surrounded the rose bush was so bright it almost overwhelmed my ability to take it in.

Was this rose bush connected to the scraggly branches I'd seen by Alastor? And had he detected the fae magic too? I knew he couldn't see it the way I could, but he used to be able to feel Motab whenever she was around.

And Motab always knew when we were close.

As I studied the great rose cavern, a new branch grew up from the ground by my feet. In ten seconds it sprouted up from a flat spot on the ground to

three feet tall. Leaves popped out on its stalk, and then two roses. The branch leaned toward me, and I extended a finger to touch it.

“What are you doing?” The soft outrage echoed through the cavern. I knew that voice. I’d heard the king project it with magic before.

I straightened up and turned to face him.

He stalked toward me, fury rolling off his broad shoulders like smoke falling from a fire. Was it really smoke? Or was I seeing his magic? I couldn’t tell the difference.

But I knew I hadn’t seen him this angry since he’d wanted to incinerate my brother.

And even though he’d been a monster of legend on that day, I was more afraid of him right now than I had been then.

I stepped backward as he marched closer to me. I stumbled over a root and fell to the floor. I threw my hands out to catch myself before my head hit the ground.

He loomed over me, like a terror from nightmares. “I trusted you,” he snarled. “I gave you more freedom than I thought was wise because I wanted to do right by you. And you turned around, in less than an hour, and betrayed me.”

“No!” I cried from the ground. “I haven’t done anything to hurt you.”

“You lie!”

“No! I haven’t lied to you. Not once!”

He bent over me and reached a hand toward my neck. I closed my eyes and waited for his grip to choke me. Or his fires to destroy me. Or whatever a drekkan king did when he thought someone had betrayed his trust.

But the violence I expected did not come.

Seconds passed.

I opened my eyes.

He still loomed over me. Anger—and maybe hurt—filled his entire countenance and rose off him in great waves. I saw the conflict in him—a debate between his most basic instincts: kill or protect. He battled with himself, and I did not dare enter the arena. How could I know which direction anything I said would tip him when I did not even understand the conflict? No conversation I’d ever had with him had made sense, and now my life hung somewhere between his unknown value system and his uncertain self-control.

I met his furious gaze. It took every piece of strength I possessed, but if he was going to kill me, I wanted him to know that I hadn’t lied to him.

“Get out,” he hissed, before I could say anything.

I opened my mouth to attempt to explain, but he cut me off.

“Get out!” he roared, sounding more like a drekkan than an elf.

I rolled over onto my hands and knees and pushed off into a run. I raced out of the epic cavern and did not look back.

I stumbled twice, nearly fell to my knees, but caught myself on my hands and kept running. When I finally reached the courtyard where all the tunnels met, I slowed to catch my breath. My hands shook and my legs burned. I glanced down the corridor I’d come from and shivered. The king was not close enough to see, but... I did not want to see him again. Whatever I had done had made him so furious that I expected him to kill me for it eventually.

And he’d told me, “*Get out.*”

I glanced down the corridor to my room, but shook my head just thinking about it. If I went there, the king could march back up and roast me any time he wanted.

“I’m sorry, Mylo,” I muttered as I turned into a tunnel marked with a tulip. “I really didn’t mean to lie to you. I hope you’ll forgive me.”





CHAPTER 10: CALLISTA

The tulip tunnel opened to a grand entryway that was far bigger than the underground cavern. Chandeliers with rows of crystals radiated magic light that brightened the space so much that it felt like midday.

I didn't wait for anyone to realize who I was. I ran straight through the middle and rushed out the fortress's main entrance. Guards shouted questions to each other behind me, but I kept running. If I had any chance of—

Of what?

I almost stopped and debated with myself. But instead, I hiked my dress up a few more inches and charged down the grand staircase outside. I had to put more distance between the angry king and myself. It was probably futile, considering the bond between us, but I couldn't just wait for him to decide that I was as horrible as every fae he'd ever imagined. I didn't know what I was hoping to accomplish, but I knew I needed more space. And fast.

The sun hadn't climbed above the mountainous horizon yet, but pink and orange light rays skittered across the sky and reflected off the snowy surfaces, lighting the world enough that I could easily see where I was going.

More elves roamed about the courtyard at the bottom of the stairs than I'd have expected at the break of dawn. Some wore soldier gear, some looked like they were exercising horses and dogs, but some looked like normal people, just gathering early to mingle. It was a strange idea, but one I did not have time to entertain.

I ran even harder, toward the impossible bridge that spanned the lake hundreds of feet below the fortress.

No guards blocked the bridge. Strange. For people so obsessed with keeping their fortress secure, you'd think they would have soldiers checking anyone who entered the bridge.

A rush of shouts erupted behind me. The guards from the fortress entryway must have decided that I shouldn't have raced through there moments earlier. Just before I climbed the steps up to the bridge, someone yelled my name.

"Callista!" Mylo. The one person I really had betrayed—though not deliberately. If intentions counted for anything, I'd never really lied. I glanced toward his voice, hoping to explain, but he was farther away than the group of soldiers who ran toward me. He held the reins of a huge horse who looked like he was ready to bolt at any distraction.

The group of soldiers caught my attention again, and I shook my head. I had to keep going. I climbed onto the bridge and raced for the other side. Before I was even a fourth of the way across, I stumbled on my own feet and fell to my knees.

I whipped my head behind me, terrified of the soldiers catching me before I regained my footing, but they had all stopped at the bridge's entrance.

"Callista." Mylo's voice carried on magic all the way out to the bridge. "Come back. I'm sure there's a solution to whatever has made you run. But... you must come off the bridge."

I shook my head slowly, and a cold wind flipped my hair in front of my face. I hadn't noticed the cold before, but now that I was still—with my hands and knees touching a frozen bridge—it chilled my entire body. I had to keep moving, had to warm back up.

I pushed up to my feet again. The soldiers still had not followed me onto the bridge. I couldn't explain it, but I wouldn't argue with good fortune.

And since they weren't making me run, I walked so I didn't fall again. I moved slower this time, and tried to catch my breath as I walked. This bridge was five or six feet wide, but didn't have a railing. I couldn't tell what held it up as it spanned hundreds of feet across the chasm with the lake at the bottom, but I refused to worry about that until I was safely on the other side.

"Callista," Mylo's voice whispered across the wind. "Whatever this is about is not worth your life on that bridge. Please come back."

I shook my head. He would think that. He was the king's most loyal soldier, the one singled out to help on my first day in the fortress. And he would get in trouble for leaving me unsupervised. No, I could not go back at his insistence.

Sunlight erupted over the mountains and spilled across the bridge like a flag unfurling. The way it sparkled off the snow and erupted over the summits caught my attention, and... I slipped again.

The icy bridge did not help my poor balance.

As I hit my hands and knees this time, though, two huge eyes emerged on the bridge in front of me. A crab-shaped body crawled up from below the bridge—a crab shaped animal that was at least four feet tall.

Its eyes rose on stalks above its head and, while I watched, it unfurled an arm-like structure from its mouth that reached up and wiped dust and dirt off its eyes.

My breathing turned shallow. I wanted to rush to my feet so I could stand taller than the monster, but I was afraid that I would slip and fall—possibly off the bridge. Now that its eyes were cleared, it seemed far too intent on me.

Did giant crabs eat people? Did I look like a giant shrimp?

I backed away slowly, glad that I was on my hands and knees, even if the icy bridge was so cold it burned my skin. At least I had a firm balance.

When I'd put fifteen feet between us, I stood up, hoping to intimidate it now that I was taller.

It didn't look intimidated.

It unfurled its strange mouth and shot a stream of fire at me.

Fire!

I threw myself to the ground as far to the right as I dared. I wrapped a hand around the edge of the bridge. Why didn't elves put walls around their bridges?

Heat from the horrible crab's fire rushed past me, close enough that I still felt it. I pressed my face against the bridge while the hot air worried me. Only inches away from my face, the huge drop to the lake—hundreds of feet—made me light-headed. How was I going to survive a fire-breathing crab *and* a mountainous fall?

As soon as the fire's heat above me disappeared, I jumped back to my feet. I avoided looking down and stepped backward. I needed to put more space between me and that *thing* before it shot fire at me again.

I kept my eyes on the arthropodic monster while stepping backward. It didn't move toward me, but a rumbling chittering sound filled the bridge behind me. I spun to see what made the noise.

The sight snagged my breath. Giant crabs—hundreds of them—skittered onto the bridge between me and the elves I'd just fled. They swarmed over each other, forming a new moving, writhing surface on the bridge.

I whipped my head around again to check on the first monster. It was no longer alone either. At least a dozen more giant crabs had joined it, and they all started unfurling their unusual mouths.

Blood rushed to my head. I couldn't dodge them all. I turned back to the larger group, and they opened their mouths too.

My breath shortened. Would they burn me from both sides? I risked a look at the lake down below, and the entire landscape tilted. I grabbed my head. *Not again*, I silently shouted at myself. *I can't keep losing my entire sense of up and down. Not when I need to make decisions.*

I glanced at the lake again. Could I survive a fall hundreds of feet like that? I shook my head. Not likely.

But these fiery crabs? Would I survive their flames? Definitely not.

I didn't have time to convince myself to jump. Their mouths opened. Flames filled my vision, and I closed my eyes.

Heat enveloped me, surrounding my body on both sides. But the searing pain I expected from fire did not come. Instead, the air warmed like a hot, summer day.

My eyes flew open, and my stomach flipped as I realized what had happened. A great black, leathery wing wrapped in front of me, shielding me from the giant horde of overgrown crabs, while a drekkan body protected me from the monsters behind us.

A new warmth rose inside my chest, and it overwhelmed me with feelings for the cursed drekkan king. He had come. He told me to leave, but he came anyway. He'd protected me again, even though I'd broken his rule, invaded his rose cavern, and run away. He'd come and rescued me from my own rash decision. I reached out and touched his wing. Heat met my fingertips. Such beautiful heat. "Thank you," I whispered.

He roared and, even from within his wing, I felt his fire sear the air. Then he unwrapped the wing around me just enough that he could turn and blow flames behind us both.

After a few seconds he lifted his wings away from my body and backed up until he made eye-contact with me. He was so big that the bridge looked very narrow and unstable under him. I wanted to tell him to hold still before he fell, but I didn't. I didn't say a word.

Piles of ashes littered the bridge, and the smells of burnt and combusting shells reached me as soon as the drekkan stepped away. Burnt shells and cold air. I wouldn't be able to cross the bridge, in either direction, until the ashes cooled and cleared. I was going to get very cold before I could leave the bridge.

The king's gravelly drekkan voice rumbled through the air. He seemed to be attempting a soft volume, but it easily carried through the morning

chill. “I’m going to pick you up unless you say not to.”

I raised my arms so his claw could wrap around my waist more securely, and then I relaxed into his warm, scaly hold as he lifted me off the bridge.





CHAPTER 11: AEDAN

I swooped down from the bridge with Callista in my claws and let the cool wind rush into my face. My heart had nearly stopped when I saw her on the bridge surrounded by the karkins.

I hadn't realized the threat of her death would affect me so dramatically.

Now that the danger had ended, my heart needed something stronger than cold air to help it recover. The burns on my skin needed help too, but at least I knew what would soothe them.

I skirted above the lake, behind the stone pillar that held my fortress, into the forest on the opposite side of the Ancestral Bridge. I dropped into a canyon barely wide enough for my wings.

Callista gasped. Had her fear of heights resurfaced?

"Do you need to stop?" I asked.

"No," she panted. "I'm fine. Just startled."

She spoke honestly, so I continued until the mountain cut away to reveal a small grotto. I landed on the edge of a large pool that was half covered by a gaping cave. Its still water reflected icicle-covered trees and frozen rock. The cave hung over half the pool, extending backward a hundred feet.

I set Callista down on the stone and stepped away from her in an effort to be less intimidating.

Her eyes widened as she took in the grotto. “This place is... incredible.” Her voice quivered, and she wrapped her hands around her arms.

“The ice crystals are beautiful,” I answered, “but perhaps I can warm a space for you.” I pressed a clawed hand to the large stone she stood on and filled both the stone and the air above it with a heat that sent steam rising above her head.

She took a huge breath and smiled. “Thank you.” It was an attractive smile—the kind that came from genuine happiness or gratitude instead of expectation or obligation. I clenched my teeth, reminding myself that I no longer trusted her.

Her brows wrinkled. “But why did you save me? I thought you thought I betrayed you.”

I sighed. Why indeed? Perhaps the only solution was as my cousin Robin had once suggested years ago with Radira—an exchange of honesty. I was too sore for anything else anyway.

I climbed into the pool and groaned as the cool healing water covered my burns.

Callista stepped closer, but did not touch the water. “Are... are you hurt?”

I did not want to admit weakness, but I felt obligated to explain the pool. “The karkins scalded large portions of my wings and back. I am... not impervious to other creatures’ magic fire. We are fortunate that I was able to fly here—this water will heal me faster than anything or anyone else could.”

She settled down on the warmed stone, cross-legged, and draped her dress over her knees. “The karkins were the giant, fire-breathing crabs?”

I nodded.

“Do they attack everyone who crosses the bridge?”

I tipped my wing so water covered it entirely. “No. Usually they stay in the lake. Once a year, sometime in the middle of winter, their broods hatch. The hatchlings are ravenous. They’ve even climbed the cliff by our stables a few times. The horses get very anxious every time they hatch.”

“I—” Her jaw dropped. “The crabs on the bridge were all *hatchlings*?”

A smirk worked its way across my face. “Yes. We were fortunate the adults did not climb out of the lake.”

“Can you do anything about them?!”

“Yes. Usually, I burn most of the hatchlings within a day or two.”

“But then how...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes widened. “They just hatched this morning,” she explained to herself. “That’s why the soldier came for Mylo. That’s why he called me back.”

I rolled my shoulders, working out the pain in my back. “So it would seem.” I raised a brow. “And you took advantage of the chaos to attack my rose.”

Her hands flew to her hips. “It might seem that way, but that is not what happened.”

I was too tired to argue, and she launched into a defense. “I saw fae magic coming from that tunnel, the one with the rose. I know you said not to go down there, but... what if it had been my mother? What if it was my only clue to where she might be hiding? I am sorry I could not follow your instructions, but... I already told you that I was hoping to find her. You...”

Her voice trembled. “You have to know I’ve missed her so much. Enough to risk your anger. I had no idea I’d be invading your rose garden.”

She stopped talking, and my heart sank into my stomach. I had to tell her. It would be cruel to let her keep hoping to find her mother when I knew she never would. But...

I did not want to.

I wanted to prove that I would keep her as safe as I’d promised. I wanted to see her eyes light up when she decided to defend someone from my

anger. And I wanted to bridle that fury so she would smile when she spoke of me.

I wanted to find out why a dry history book would make her tear up, discover what she loved about lemons, and understand how she had come to forgive Koan and Jolter.

I wanted to learn everything about her, but... I could not allow her to keep believing a lie. It was neither just nor necessary for anyone's safety.

Emotion filled her voice. "Why do you refuse to believe everything I—"

I cut her off. "I believe you." The drekkan's voice was harsh and gravelly, but it was all I had. And if I waited until night, I might lose the courage that her near-death had shaken loose inside me. "I can feel when you lie."

She sniffed and brushed at her eye. "The lemons?"

I huffed the drekkan's version of a chuckle. "Yes, the lemons. The... bond vibrates when you lie."

She rubbed her chest. "Then why have you not—"

"There is something else you need to know," I interrupted. She stopped, and my throat constricted. My parents died fourteen years ago. If someone confessed to their murders today, I would consume them in flames. In an instant. My pain was still too raw for any other reaction. Was I really capable of inflicting that same pain on her by telling her that her mother was dead at my hand?

It would be the cruelest thing I had done to her yet.

But anything short of that honesty would be even more dishonorable than the crimes I needed to confess.

"I do not know what fae magic you thought you saw," I said, grateful for the drekkan's twisted contortion of my voice, "but it was not your mother's."

Her head tipped at me, and she waited for more.

I swallowed. “She...your mother... I met her that day, thirteen years ago, when she came into Hemlit. We argued. I... I worried that she had something to do with my parents’ death a year before that, and I... I tricked her into touching a talisman that absorbed all the magic in her body.”

Callista gasped. Her jaw fell. She knew.

And as I saw her realization dawn, my chest hurt. I wanted to disappear, to have the ground itself swallow me, and let me blink out of existence.

But the ground did not comply.

And I was left to stare at Callista’s undeserved pain. Perhaps if she understood better, it would hurt less. “I didn’t think it would really hurt her,” I explained. “I thought her magic would replenish itself after a few hours...”

Callista shook her head and jumped to her feet. “You killed her.” Tears filled her eyes, but she kept talking. “Her magic was tied up in her heart. If she didn’t have magic, her heart would have stopped. Taking it means you killed her, as surely as if you’d put a knife in her chest!”

“I didn’t know,” I rasped. Curse the drekkan and its horrible masking of my voice. It made me sound apathetic. But I wasn’t apathetic. I hurt as much as she did. “I did not mean to even injure her. Truly. I was trying to protect—”

Callista waved an arm to interrupt and then clutched her hands to her chest. “You talk of protection and honor, but they mean nothing without kindness. You fear what you do not understand, and you let that fear rule you.”

Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper as she gestured to my body. “This drekkan is no monster compared to the beast that lives in your heart. I... I cannot stand to even look at you.”

And then she spun and walked away.





CHAPTER 12: AEDAN

I sat in the pool while she stormed away, stunned into my own thoughts. Her words invaded my mind, attacking my deepest insecurities.

You talk of protection and honor, but they mean nothing without kindness.

Not true. Protection and honor were everything. Kindness had to come second to them. Didn't it?

You fear what you do not understand, and you let that fear rule you.

That, perhaps, was true. I hated to admit it, but I was terrified of what I could not control, what I could not protect from. That fear led to every regret I had... but not every sorrow. And if I had not fought to protect my people, they would suffer even more.

The drekkan is no monster compared to the beast that lives in your heart.

And that was my shame. I could not even argue it. Radira's dying words had cursed me to suffer "the effects of my own monsters." Was it a surprise that her daughter made the same accusation thirteen years later?

Her daughter. Callista had touched me in ways I never expected. She might not want to ever see my face again, but perhaps I could try to lessen her pain.

No, her pain would never lessen. My parents had been dead longer, and it still made me angry.

But her pain was my fault. I *could* be kind to her. I could make her life comfortable in the fortress. I could—

My eyes flew to the path she'd marched down at least ten minutes ago. A frozen, ice-covered path into a forest full of monsters.

I jumped out of the pool and crashed through the same path, breaking crystals and smashing plants that blocked my monster-sized body. The bond hadn't warned me of her fear, so she should be safe, but I still worried. There were too many—

My thoughts broke away abruptly when I saw her. She had found a dry, not frozen, patch of ground surrounded by part of a massive, ancient, gnarled tree that had grown around a large crevice, providing shelter from the winter wind.

I stopped a hundred feet away from her. "I know you don't want to see me, but I don't want you to freeze to death. Or get eaten. Can I take you back to the fortress?"

She folded her arms and leaned against the tree. "I thought my entire purpose here was so you could kill me. Does it really matter if another animal gets to me first? My brother wouldn't know."

The tree's empty branches shook, as if threatening me if I answered wrong.

"I don't *want* you to die," I ground out.

"Really?" She stood taller and glared at me with puffy eyes. "You killed my mother. Tried to kill my brother. And almost killed me." She rubbed her chest. "Bound me as a death option. But you don't *want* me to die?"

I clenched my hands and ground my teeth, burying a growl that tried to escape. I wouldn't be able to convince her. No matter what the truth was, the evidence against me was too condemning. I crouched and leaped into the air.

She jumped out of her little crevice. "Wait! Where are you going?"

I flapped my wings to hover. “To tell Mylo to find a way to get you home before you die out here.”

Her brows pursed together. “Can he fly?”

“No. He will have to descend the pillar and cross the lake.” The thought of Mylo attempting to fly was ridiculous... though, perhaps I could fly him to the shoreline. That would make it a little easier—

“Will you take me?” She placed a hand on the tree as if thanking it, and then stepped closer to me. She raised her chin. “Will you, Your Majesty?”

I swallowed through a tight throat. She had spoken in a polite and respectful tone, but my title felt like a curse on her lips. Or an accusation. I was the king. I should have protected the people in my borders better—even if they were fae.

I stretched my arms toward her, and she lifted hers. Once I held her firmly in my grip, I took to the sky.





CHAPTER 13: CALLISTA

Rapid knocking interrupted my mindless staring at the snow out my window. I tightened the blanket around my shoulders. It was a smooth, soft blanket that felt like a hug. I'd wrapped it around me days ago and hadn't let go since.

It had been a full week since I'd left my room.

A week since the disaster on the bridge.

A week since I'd learned the truth of my mother's death.

Food kept coming to my room, but I hadn't invited Koan or Jolter in to join me. I needed space for myself.

I hadn't done much besides let my mind spin in circles and my sobs cry into a blanket, but I'd needed the space for those things as much as for any other productive things that I might have done.

The knocking continued.

Nobody but Koan would be so persistent, but even he had left me alone until now. Maybe the king told him why I didn't want to talk to anyone, or maybe he just heard about the disaster I'd made with the karkins and figured I was traumatized.

He didn't stop knocking.

I sighed and stood up. He was the closest thing I had to a friend here. Perhaps I should give him a proper explanation.

Before I reached the door, he called out. “Callista! This is an intervention! We’re coming in whether you want us to or not. You have one minute.”

The knocking stopped, and I heard Jolter hiss at him. “Koan! We won’t go in there if she doesn’t want us to.”

“Shh!” he *whispered* back. He started to say something else, but a large crash interrupted him.

“You will do nothing that she does not want you to,” a terrifyingly familiar voice ordered. The king’s gravelly drekkan spoke as soft as I’d ever heard him, but... drekkans were not designed for whispers.

I pressed my ear against the door. Koan sighed dramatically. “Of course we won’t. But she doesn’t know that. She’ll let us in.” Then, as if he hadn’t just been growled at by a giant flying lizard king, he called out cheerily, “Half a minute!”

A small chuckle rose up my throat. For the first time in a week, I nearly laughed. I thought the king usually left the castle when he was in his drekkan form, but apparently he was in his room today, keeping an eye—or ear—on Koan and Jolter.

I swung the door wide open. I wouldn’t keep them in the hall if the king was staring at them.

Koan slipped around me, closed the door, and then turned to face me with Jolter at his side. “Here’s the thing,” Koan started. “Karkins are scary. Someone should have warned you before you went out there. But you can’t hide from everything in the elven world because of that. There are a lot of really great things too.”

So he didn’t know about Motab.

And I wasn’t ready to tell him yet. Maybe she had died thirteen years ago but—to me—it felt like it happened a week ago, the moment I’d found out. It felt abrupt and harsh to say, “I just learned my mother died,” when he was trying to be sympathetic about monsters.

Koan kept talking. “So there’s a concert tonight, and the king said we could have his box if you came with us.”

I folded my arms. “I am not going to sit with the king at a concert.”

Koan linked arms with his brother. “Nah, you’d be sitting with us. I don’t think the king will even go. He’s been hiding in his room as long as you have.”

Jolter elbowed Koan’s gut, and he let his deliberately careless grin fall. “You two really need to figure something out. It’s weird having him avoid you while going out of his way to make sure other people keep you safe and happy.”

He was avoiding me?

I clenched my jaw. As he should. I’d hide from him too if I’d killed his mother.

“Will you come with us?” Jolter asked.

Koan shot him a sideways eye-roll. “Or tell us what’s really going on?” His gaze traveled to the wall I shared with the king. “Has he done anything... untoward?”

I focused on the feel of my blanket. It was soft, but I didn’t really want to hide in it forever. Motab would not have wanted me to stop living just because she did. Maybe I could go enjoy this concert with my friends and not think about all of the horrible things that had happened during the last few weeks.

I fisted my hand in the blanket. “Nothing like that.” My eyes shifted from the king’s door to Koan. “I’ll come. When do I need to be ready?”

Koan nodded slowly. “We’ll come get you an hour after sunset. I can send your dinner up earlier than normal. And I’ll send a maid to help you get ready.”

I didn’t need a maid. I opened my mouth to protest, but Koan cut me off before I spoke.

“Callista, please, let me send someone. I’ll send her at sunset, and she’ll just help with your hair or any other last minute things. Jemina used to complain more about her hair than anything else.”

I raised a brow. “Jemina?”

Jolter grinned. “Our sister. Other girls would never complain to him—they just wanted to make friends with his money or position.”

We hadn’t talked much about their family. “Does she live very far?”

Jolter’s grin faded as he nodded. “Outside the curse boundary. We haven’t seen her for thirteen years.”

Koan patted my shoulder. “We’ll be back. Take your time.”



A new knock hit my door precisely as the sun disappeared below the mountainous horizon. I had managed to clean and dress myself with time to spare. I replaced the blanket with a shawl and opened the door.

A maid dropped into a curtsy as if I were some kind of royalty. I almost corrected her and told her I was a prisoner, but I decided to hold my tongue. If I said too many words, I might start crying again for no apparent reason.

“Master Koan said you might like a lady’s maid to help with your hair and accessories. I’m Malinda.”

I pushed a smile onto my face and nearly grimaced at the way my cheeks resisted the change in position. Had it really been that long since I smiled?

“Thank you, Malinda. I’m not really in a mood to talk much, but I do need help with my hair.”

Honestly, I had no idea what to do with it. Dresses were obvious enough, even though Mylo’s dress-maker had filled my wardrobe with more

designs than I would need in a lifetime. Still, it didn't take a princess to figure out how to put them on.

My hair, though... Once I really thought about how I was going to a royal event with nobles in an elven castle, my education—from a lifetime of living in a cabin on the edge of the woods—felt woefully insufficient to prepare for any event here.

Malinda hummed softly as she twisted and braided my hair into elegant loops. Once half of it was tied up, she twirled the lower tresses around her fingers. Heat emanated from her hands and, when she unwrapped my hair, it stayed curled.

She used magic heat to curl my hair. That reminded me of the king. “Can you make fire in your hands too?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Like the king?” I clarified.

She smiled. “Yes, though he is far more powerful than I am. I can heat hair and hold a fireball. He could cover the fortress in fire if he wanted.”

My brows shot up. *Cover the fortress in fire?*

She dropped another warm lock of hair on the back of my neck. “It's a tricky kind of magic. Sometimes, when I get upset or angry, it rushes to my fingertips, and it takes all my self control to keep it inside. And yet, it's such a small amount.”

She chuckled as she picked up another bit of hair. “When I was younger, and still learning to control it, I lost a few fireballs and put some holes in walls. I can't even imagine the restraint the king has. I've never seen him lose control of anything more than a little smoke.”

I, too, had seen smoke rise off him when he was angry. But he hadn't been in control of himself when he killed my mother.

Or had he? He didn't say he consumed her with flames. He said he tricked her into holding a talisman that absorbed all her magic. He *said* he did not intend to hurt her.

I pushed the thoughts away. I did not want to give the king any space in my mind right now. I was going to go enjoy a concert with friends, dressed up like a princess.

“Done,” Malinda said, smiling into the mirror at me. “Fit for a princess, if I do say so myself.”

Yes, I looked more like a princess than any I’d seen in books or imagined in my head.

Right on cue, Koan knocked on the door. Malinda bobbed another curtsy and opened it for him.

He thanked her and turned to me. “Callista, I am honored to escort you this evening.” He bowed and offered me an elbow.

I took his arm, and my thoughts flashed to Alastor. Had he moved to the human town like I told him to? Was he making friends? I should find a way to tell him about Motab.

We stepped into the hallway, and Koan tipped his head conspiratorially at me. “I should warn you, every lady in the theater will be jealous of you tonight.”

That pulled me out of my thoughts. “Why?” I poked him. “Are you that popular?”

He winked. “Truthfully, my family is one of the oldest noble families in the kingdom. If the curse ever lifts, I will inherit a ridiculously sized fortune. I’ve had ladies throwing themselves at me for years.” He patted my hand. “Don’t worry, I know you don’t see me like that. But you have one other honor that nobody has ever had in our entire history that I’m aware of.”

“And what’s that?”

“We have a concert of some kind at the start of every month. The king has never—in all fourteen years since he took the throne—invited anyone to sit with him, let alone to take the best seat in the theater.”

That was curious. “So why did he give it to you?”

Koan laughed. “You’re missing the point. He didn’t give it to me. He gave it to *you*.”

My heart sped up. “Surely not.”

Koan sobered, but his smile didn’t leave his face. “I’m sure of it. He told Jolter and I that we could take it if we could convince you to join us. If you weren’t coming, we would be in the main seating with everyone else.”

“But why?” He hated fae, hated my family, hated me. Why offer such a singular honor? And why include Koan and Jolter, whom he clearly considered delinquent miscreants?

“I was hoping you could tell me. I haven’t been able to figure it out.” Koan slowed down just enough to look at me as he answered, but then carried on to the indoor courtyard where eight tunnels met. This time, we turned into the corridor with a lily carved into the stone above it.

I couldn’t think of an answer for Koan. His question would probably plague me for the rest of my life, but I decided to change the subject for tonight. “Where’s Jolter? I expected him to come with you.”

“Ah.” A twinkle lit Koan’s eye. “He’s escorting a date. Her name is Molanna—I think you’ll like her.”

I raised a brow, and he kept talking. “I was thorough in my interrogation—she thinks Jolter is sweet, even if the curse never falls and he remains a derelict vagabond for the next ten thousand years. Also, she thinks both humans and fae are as worthy of respect and kindness as elves, so I decided that letting her sit with us would be acceptable.”

I smiled. It was getting easier every time. Leaving my room was a good idea.

The theater probably held three hundred seats, but we didn’t walk into the main room. We entered through a small hallway that led to a balcony on the second floor with a walking path around the entire perimeter of the theater’s seating area. We followed the path to a bridge that crossed like a second floor above the main seating. In the middle of the bridge, with the most perfect view of the stage, was a box that held four chairs.

Jolter and—I assumed—Molanna stood up from chairs to welcome me. Jolter actually pulled me into a hug. “Callista, I’m so glad you came. After we saw you earlier, I was afraid you might change your mind.”

I hugged him back, but then pulled out of it and eyed his date. I didn’t want her to assume I was some kind of competition. “I’m glad I came too.”

She stepped closer and took my hand. “I’m Molanna, but you can call me Anna. I’ve been hoping to meet you for weeks.”

“Really?” I asked. “Because every other elf I’ve met seems to hate me.”

Koan popped his hands on his hips. “Hey, now.”

I rolled my eyes. “Especially these two. I think they hate me the most.”

Molanna laughed, but then she slid closer to me and lowered her voice. “That’s because you’ve been here in the fortress. Most of the elves here are rich, elitist nobles. They’ll hate humans, fae, and elves from other kingdoms with equal animosity. If you leave the fortress, though, even just to the villages that are still inside the curse’s boundary, you’ll find much friendlier elves.”

Jolter folded his arms. “Technically, my family’s lands are quite far from the fortress.”

Molanna raised a teasing smile at him. “And yet, where did you spend your free time?”

Koan elbowed his brother. “I’m starting to wonder if your date is more interested in my friend than you.”

Jolter elbowed him back. “She’s my friend, too.”

Molanna rolled her eyes at me. “Maybe we should sit between these two so they stay separated.” I snorted a very undignified, but soft, laugh as we shifted to the chairs.

About twenty minutes later, the event began with a double quartet performing an extravagant piece I’d never heard before. As their first notes blended, it reminded me of a waterfall, but as the pace sped up, it

felt like the waterfall rose out of its normal course and started dancing. I leaned forward and tried to keep track of the notes, but they careened and flew so masterfully, that eventually I just leaned back and closed my eyes.

I didn't even know all the instruments. The two lutes were familiar, but the others were as magical as a maid who curled my hair with heat that rose from her hands.

After a deafening applause at the end of the song, one of the lute players introduced a song he'd written for his wife. The stage darkened, except for a spotlight on him...

And my emotions fell apart. Memories of my father singing for my mother made me light-headed.

Tears blurred my vision. I needed to get out. Find a safe place to sniff and clear my eyes without drawing the attention of every person in this theater.

"I'll be back," I whispered. I slid past Koan, along the balcony path, and slipped into the hallway outside the theater.

I dragged a ragged, raspy breath past my silent sobs, knowing if I made too much noise, people in the theater could still hear. But the extra wall gave me a little more freedom from curious, hateful eyes.

"Callista?" a familiar voice whispered.

No. No, no, no. That voice was supposed to be in his room in a tower a long walk away.

"What are you doing here?" I asked the king in a shaky whisper.

He moved closer, until I easily saw his dark silhouette in the shadowy hall. "I... wanted to hear the concert." Did his voice tremble too?

Exasperation and anger meshed together in an uncomfortable blend in my chest, drying my tears and pushing me to confrontation. "Then why did you give your spot away?"

Silence.

Five seconds. Then ten. And then fifteen.

“Because,” he started, but then paused again. He made a dramatic, slow sigh, and then tipped his forehead against the wall in front of him.

“Because I wanted to do something that might bring you some happiness, and this was the best I could think of. You deserve it more than I do.”

His sincere, forlorn tone deflated the fight that I had ready to throw at him.

After a few more seconds, he lifted his head away from the wall abruptly.

“Why are you out here? Did Koan or Jolter—”

I shook my head. “They’ve both been wonderful.”

“Then—”

Now I sighed. I didn’t want to tell him the things that hurt so much I thought I’d never breathe again, but... he was the only person here—the only person in the entire world—who knew the real reason I’d stayed in my room for a week. Telling someone might feel good—even if I hated him.

I sank to the floor and leaned my back against the wall, pulling my knees up close to my chest. “The lute player reminded me of my father.”

The king came closer and sat on the ground in front of me. “What happened?”

I hugged my knees. “There was some kind of accident. He fell, and hit his head wrong, probably on a rock. Motab—my mother—was with me at home. She grabbed her chest and ran to him.”

I relaxed my arms enough that I could lean forward and rest my chin on my knees. “When she came home, she told me he had left this world. I asked if she would also, because their hearts were tied together with a fae marriage bond.”

I swallowed, grateful for the dark that enveloped us. I couldn’t stand to look into his bright green eyes right now, not when he would see all the pain that had come from losing someone who could never be replaced. “She said she would not die until Alastor and I both reached adulthood. She had channeled all her magic and wrapped it up in her heart in a way that sealed the hole left by Fotab—my father.”

I blew out a shaky breath and clutched my legs. “It wasn’t permanent. She started aging like a human, but she said it would work like a patch for another ten or fifteen years. I was nearly an adult and Alastor is only ten years younger than me. I worried a lot about it actually working, especially when her hair turned gray and she grew wrinkles so quickly, but she told us her heart would hold. And I could see her magic entirely focused around her heart, so I thought we would have those ten or fifteen years.”

I swallowed again. I didn’t have the strength to be angry right now, but the king knew the rest. “We had two years,” I added, “before she disappeared.”

The king didn’t move. “I was a fool,” he whispered. “And I wish, more than anything, that I could fix it.”

And for the first time in a week, I believed him.





CHAPTER 14: AEDAN

We sat in silence for a short time before Koan came looking for Callista. His eyes widened when he saw me, but she went back to the theater with him, and I did not see her for the rest of the performance.

Was it wrong to wish she'd come back out? To wish we could have spoken longer? To wish that she might come to see me as someone besides the monster who killed her family?

I did not sleep, but I was careful not to hit any walls or desks as I considered my life. I wanted my people to see me as honorable and protective, but more than that I wanted her to. I wanted her to think well of me, and that meant... I also wanted her to consider me kind.

And I wanted to control my fears. I'd spent the better part of my life controlling my anger, but she had been right. I did let my fears dictate my actions. And that needed to stop.

But in order to fear less, I needed to understand more.

And to understand more, I had to offer something.

With that purpose, I sat down at my desk and started writing.





CHAPTER 15: CALLISTA

My eyes hurt with the lingering pain of having cried myself to sleep last night. I had only managed a few hours of sleep, but my mind was already busy enough that I would not be getting any more. I focused on the window. Pale blues filtered in—sunrise would break soon, and the kitchen would send food. I pushed myself to get dressed, to set down the blanket and slip into a simple gown.

It was easier to walk away from my blanket than it had been yesterday. Was it because I'd done it once already? Would leaving my room be easier today also? Speaking to others? Smiling?

After I buttoned the front of my dress, I walked around the bed and saw a sheet of folded parchment next to the door that led to the king's room. I hadn't left anything there. Had he slid it under the door?

I opened it and forgot all my small thoughts about clothes and blankets.

Dear Callista,

You accused me of being unkind. Of not understanding and of basing my actions in fear.

Of being a monster.

And you are right.

You once called me an honorable monster, but the things I have done are not honorable. I tried to justify my behavior, but those rationalizations were excuses for my fears.

I would like to submit myself to you for punishment. As you said once before, you were the person wronged, and so you should get to decide the justice to balance the injury I gave you.

*Humbly,
Aedan*

I read it three times. Was this possible? The king signing anything *Humbly*? And without any titles?

But more importantly, did he mean it?

I tapped on the door.

He opened it immediately and locked eyes with me. He was fully dressed, with a coat loose over the sword and dagger belted around his fine trousers. His white shirt was mostly buttoned, but the top few seemed to have been ripped apart. The gaze that normally radiated power looked haunted and vulnerable. He braced his hands against the sides of the doorframe and breathed heavily, as if standing in my presence was some kind of strenuous workout.

I wanted to remind him of Motab's murder, to make him feel some fraction of the pain that had pressed against my chest for days, to see if he really felt the remorse he described in his letter, to twist that remorse until he suffered...

And it would be so easy. He looked broken. I could not reconcile his drawn face, disheveled hair, and trembling posture with the fire-wielding, arrogant monster I knew him as.

I waved the letter at him. "What is this?"

He straightened and brought his anxious breathing under control. "Did you read it?"

“I did.” Blood pounded in my head, clouding my thoughts. I closed my eyes, took two breaths, and then met his gaze again. “But the words on this parchment are so outside of my experiences with you that I cannot believe you actually wrote them.”

“I wrote them,” he said softly.

My voice dropped to a whisper. “What did you write?”

He spread his hands to the door frame again and gripped it. His words came out hoarse and ragged. “I wrote that I am a monster. I should not have tricked your mother—I should have been honest and questioned what I did not know. In killing her, even unintentionally, I have wronged you in a way that I cannot correct. But I will submit to any punishment you believe is appropriate.”

My head pounded harder. He could not really mean *any punishment*. “What limitations? What qualifications?”

“None,” he breathed. He dragged in a long, deep breath and met my eyes. “Truly.”

The hammering in my head spread. It pounded through my blood and heated my skin. I could hardly breathe. He couldn’t really mean that... could he?

“What if,” I whispered, “I want you dead, like my mother?”

He pulled a dagger off the belt on his hip and extended the hilt toward me. “Then I would offer you my knife.”

I stretched a trembling hand out to take it. Five sparkling rubies decorated the crossguard and another capped the elaborate pommel. He stepped closer and wrapped his hand over mine, sealing it on the hilt. The heat from his skin flooded mine, and his voice dropped so low that it rumbled like the drekkan’s. “Or, knowing your aversion to violence, I would also offer to take a poison that will stop my heart, or...” His voice caught. “Or I would submit myself to any method of death you choose.”

“And then what?” I could not speak over a whisper, not with him inches away and our hands wrapped around a dagger hilt. The strength in his

hands yelled at me not to trust this humility. It could not be real. “What,” I asked, “would your kingdom do without its king?”

He bowed his head. “A cursed king that has trapped his people in the capital he tried to protect?” He shook his head. “I do not know much about fae curses, but I hope that my death will open the barrier, free my people, and allow my cousin to come in and rule. But if not, I have left detailed instructions on my desk for my aunt to rule here and for the D’Aeran twins’ status to be elevated so they have enough authority to keep you safe.”

Tears pressed at the corners of my eyes, and I blinked them back furiously. He’d made arrangements for *me* to be safe in the event that I chose to have him killed. In this moment, he felt more real than any other time I’d seen him. Like a man, without magic, broken by choices he wished he’d made differently. His words tore into my soul as hard as any truth ever had. It did not matter what emotion I had this week—my body responded by wanting to cry. “I...”

I did not know what to say. Who offered themselves up for a death sentence? “Why would you do that?”

His hand tightened around mine, and I squeezed the hilt in response. “Because.” His soft, tormented words came slowly. “If our positions were reversed, I would demand your punishment equal your crime. In this case, it would be death. I cannot live a double standard and consider myself just. So I made the appropriate arrangements.”

He really expected me to *kill* him. “But you said it was an accident? That you did not trick her with the intent to hurt her.”

“But the deceit was not an honorable action. And its consequences were devastating.”

I pressed my thumb against a gem on the hilt until the pressure hurt. The small pain triggered a cascading identification of pain: I hurt because I missed my mother. I hurt because anger was eating me, from the inside out. And now I hurt because my reality was shifting in a way I did not expect—a way that pounded in my head and shook my voice.

My reality an hour ago was overshadowed and controlled by an evil king who had murdered my mother. Now... the world slanted.

Now, the evil king was a broken man who had made horrible mistakes, and I—I—controlled his fate.

And he expected me to kill him.

But he hadn't meant to kill my mother.

As much as I wanted to make him feel my hurt, he wasn't entirely evil. He'd spared Alastor his justice when I'd asked. And Koan and Jolter. And maybe, if I could spare the king my anger, I could also spare myself the pain that came with it.

My own voice turned as ragged as his, but my mind cleared. I needed this as much as he did. "You did not intend for it to happen. Like I did not intend to hurt your rose and like Koan and Jolter did not intend to offend you." I pulled the dagger closer to me. It was strong and solid and glowed with vibrant silver magic.

He let go of it, and I gripped it against my chest—one solid item to wrap my slanting world around. I felt like I'd run up a mountain all day, but the pounding in my head stopped for the first time since I'd seen his letter. My next words came out breathy but determined, as much for myself as for him. "I. Will. Not. Kill. You."

A knot that had been caught in my chest burst open, and fresh air rushed into my lungs for the first time in days. I squeezed the dagger tighter as a weight lifted from my soul so fast it left me light-headed.

The king dropped to his knees and blew a long, slow breath out. "Thank you." He raised his eyes to mine. "And what would you have me do?"

My heart sped up again as memories blurred my vision. This king asking for permission to carry me when he was a drekkan. This king protecting me from elves and giant crabs. This king handing me a book. This king giving up his seat in the theater. And now, this king kneeling in front of a cottage-raised half-fae who had less status in his kingdom than any other person.

He didn't have to do any of that. His life would have been so much simpler if he had just let me die. He could have flooded my room in fire—consumed and erased the only person who knew what he'd done—but instead he knelt.

I didn't know what to tell him. My heart warred with itself. Part of me wanted to help him, but part of my mind latched onto his words. He needed some kind of consequence for his actions thirteen years ago, right? Deciding to not ask for his just death did not mean he should escape all consequences. But shouldn't his more recent actions weigh more in whatever scales of justice I was supposed to be considering?

“What do you think we should do?” I finally asked.

A hope lit his green eyes in a way that the anger and power he usually wore never could. “I would welcome a beating,” he said. “I would wear magic-cancelling cuffs so the pain lasted longer.”

“Why?” I blurted out. “Why are you so eager for more pain? Is there no such thing as enough for you?” I was so sick of it. The beatings and the fear he ruled with and the way he kept himself apart from everyone. It made him seem untouchable, but now I saw the truth. Underneath it all he was just another person trying to figure out this world.

He stayed on his knees, but drew back his shoulders and gripped his wrist behind his back. “I want to do better, but... I should pay for the damage I've already done. It is as close to justice as we can get without more death.”

“It won't bring her back,” I whispered. “There is no payment that will fix death.”

He grimaced, and the muscles in his arm bulged. “That does not mean I should escape any consequences for it.”

A sweat broke out along his forehead, faster than I'd expect from nerves—even if they were the nerves of a king who hated himself. A light emanated from his skin, like the glow from a candle, and then he stifled a pained grunt.

“What's wrong?” I asked. “Something's—”

He clenched his teeth, bowed his head, and groaned—like a drekkan.

And then I remembered. Elf by night. Drekkan by day. I whipped my head around to the window, where early sunbeams sprinkled into the room.

“You’re shifting into a drekkan?”

He nodded and bent downward, as if his stomach hurt.

I didn’t know what to do to help him, but I knew he wouldn’t fit in the door between our rooms as a monster.

“Go!” I hissed, waving at the door. “You have more space in your room.”

He turned his tormented eyes to me again, and then stumbled back into his own suite.

I shoved the door closed behind him.





CHAPTER 16: AEDAN

I did everything I could to avoid roaring as the fire in my blood ripped through my body, incinerating some bones while elongating others. The daily ritual of turning into a beast was just as painful as the first time it had ever happened, but—fortunately—only a few seconds long.

When it finished, I sprawled across my floor panting. For thirteen years the grueling experience had honed my hatred for the fae who had cursed me—for every fae that she represented—but today felt different. Today it felt like an insufficient penance.

Somewhere in the heart of last night, I'd discovered an intense remorse. The dozens of letters I'd drafted trying to explain myself to Callista or ask her to explain more to me were now ashes. I incinerated them all and dusted the remnants into a bin.

The words I'd finally settled on were the deepest feelings I had left. Deeper than my anger at being cursed. Deeper than my anger at whoever killed my own parents. Deeper than my desire to be a good king.

When I'd finally looked as deep as I could, I found a dissonance between who I claimed to be and who I was. And that dissonance had led to death, a curse, and more misery for my own people and for Callista than I could possibly catalog.

If only I could go back thirteen years and take Robin's advice to speak to Radira instead of tricking her into surrendering the power I thought gave her a dangerous advantage over us!

But I could not go back. I could never fix this. I wanted to disappear, to melt into the ice and stone beneath my castle or—even better—to not have existed at all. I claimed to be a paragon of justice and safety, but I had brought more pain and unjustified suffering to the people around me than anyone I'd ever punished.

Callista had once argued that she should get to choose a punishment when she was the wronged party and, in the middle of the night, I'd latched onto that idea. If she could create justice in the world again, perhaps my mistakes could finally be rectified. Perhaps the curse would finally leave my people.

Callista—who had been wronged irreparably by my fears, who had offered herself in her brother's place, who gave people second chances and stood up strong even when her heart trembled with fear, whose kindness and bravery were as attractive as her sweet smile, who deserved to be safe and happy—she was willing to consider bringing justice back into my life.

But the curse had interrupted. I rolled over and groaned. The curse had not even let me have a full conversation. I'd tried to delay it, tried with everything I possessed, but the transformation was not a change I had any control over.

Perhaps it was just as well. I should not make Callista responsible for my conscience.



Late in the afternoon, a piece of folded parchment slid under the door from Callista's room. I dragged it closer to me with a claw. My hands and claws were far too big to maneuver the paper's folds, but I managed to blow on it

until it fluttered open in the air. I caught it and pressed it to the ground so I could read.

Dear Aedan,

Can I call you Aedan? Anything else feels too formal for the thoughts and feelings I have to express.

I think you have suffered consequences for your cruelty for thirteen years. There is no such thing as “escaping punishment” at this point. It is burned into your whole body.

There are many things I would like, but I do not want to demand them from you as payment for your mistakes. That would remove all meaning from them and make them feel like a cheap recompense.

I would humbly suggest you put your energy into becoming a better king, a kinder elf, and a more patient person. Perhaps even give others a little grace to make mistakes and grow too.

*Truly,
Callista*

I read it again, and again. And again, at least a dozen times, not because the tone did not fit her personality—as she’d said of my letter—but because the words cooled a painful fire in my heart that I had not recognized as separate from my normal magic.

She thought I had suffered already. And I had. *Oh, Callista, if you only knew how the pain tore me apart last night when I discovered a hatred for myself.* It had been worse than the wretched shift I went through every morning and evening.

But to have someone else validate it as possibly *enough*—a strange bead of moisture ran from the corner of my eye and along my scaled cheek until it dropped to the floor. My intense drekkan ears heard it hit the wood-covered ground and splatter into an undetectable bit of moisture.

I had not known I could cry as a drekkan.

But the mercy she offered me in a letter cut through a dam I'd built when my parents died. I had not shed a tear in fourteen years, not as an elf nor a drekkan, but the relief I felt at her words broke out of my body in enough tears that I pulled all the blankets off my bed and used them to catch the moisture.

I let myself weep. I did my best to keep it silent, but I cried fourteen years' worth of tears. I cried for my mistakes, for the pain I'd brought to others, and for the death I'd caused. I cried for my own parents' deaths and for the hurt I still carried at not knowing the cause. I cried, in the privacy of my own silent quarters, until my tear wells were as dry as the scales on my back. And then I laid my head on those blankets, and fell asleep.



Crushing pain ripped me out of my sleep as my body shifted back into an elf. I glanced at the window. Most of the sky had darkened, but a few pink rays still lingered over the mountain horizon.

A burst of laughter drew my attention to Callista's door. The twins must be having dinner with her. As the laughter died down, Callista's voice rose high enough that her words traveled clearly through the wall. "You need to bring her! Just warn me so I'm dressed properly."

"We should ask the king about you leaving." Koan's jovial voice held both humor and his new-found maturity. "He said Mylo could escort you anywhere, and I don't see any reason why he would change his mind on that."

"Not anywhere," Callista said. "I told you he said not to go downstairs, and I did. Honestly, I'm still a little surprised he didn't just let the karkins have me."

No, Callista. I told you that you would be safe. How can you still doubt that?

“Well,” Koan went on, “I still think it would be good for you to enjoy some dinners outside your room, and I’m happy to risk the king’s anger to ask him.”

“That’s because you get a weird thrill risking his anger,” Jolter interjected. “It’s like cliff-jumping. The risk of certain death makes it more fun for you.”

Koan laughed again. “We only have so many thrills these days.”

I could imagine Jolter rolling his eyes as he started talking again. “If we want a decent chance of him saying yes, Callista should ask.”

“That’s not fair,” Koan said. “She’s dealt with his anger more than the rest of us.”

Not true! I’d reined in my anger more for her than any other person in the castle. Probably anyone ever except for Robin, and he’d been gone since the curse.

“Maybe,” Jolter said. “But he’s still said yes to everything she’s asked. You don’t have nearly that kind of record.”

“Hmph.” They wouldn’t hear me, but I couldn’t help huffing. Jolter was right. But I wouldn’t make her ask for this.

Their conversation grew more muffled and then interspersed with chairs moving and feet shuffling.

I waited until her room was silent and knocked on the door.

She didn’t answer immediately. When a minute passed, I turned away and headed to my desk. Perhaps she did not want to talk to me tonight.

Two seconds after I sat down, the door opened. I jumped to my feet and strode to the doorframe between our rooms. Red puffed around her eyes, like she’d either cried or rubbed them. But she’d sounded so happy a few minutes earlier.

I bowed politely. At this point, I considered her more noble than any of the ladies in my court—her noble heart had given me permission to *live*. Assuming she would tell me if she wanted to talk about whatever had

turned her eyes red, I jumped to my purpose. “I want to thank you for the letter you gave me.”

She dipped her head in acknowledgement.

“I...” I was not sure how to say the things in my heart. It was not accustomed to having a voice. But I could not expect her to read my mind. “I would like to give you... several things too. Not as a payment or recompense, but because I am grateful. I...”

Her head tipped at me like she did not understand what I was saying.

“It should not cheapen a kind gesture,” I stammered, “just because there is gratitude behind it.”

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head the tiniest bit. “No, it should not.”

I blew out a breath of air. I had not ever considered myself unkind, but saying the generous words I wanted to felt foreign and unpracticed.

I swallowed and tried again. “I would like to give you access to the entire fortress. You have the freedom to come and go as you please. I’ll go and announce it in the dining hall forthwith so nobody should question you tomorrow.”

Her jaw fell just a little. I’d surprised her. Good. Perhaps I was already changing her expectations of me.

She cleared her throat. “What about the cave where the rose bush is?”

I met her eyes—her bright blue eyes. They held me captive, on top of a precipice. This was more than a simple question. She would release me when I answered, and then I would fall—down one slope or another. One side held certain doom and misery, but it was the easier side to tilt toward. The other side was shrouded, hidden in the uncertainty of her reaction, but it hinted at a happiness that had escaped me for years.

I reached for the doorframe. I knew very well that it would not keep me balanced on the fragile precipice on which I hovered, but it was the only stabilization I could touch.

I swallowed and leaped for uncertainty, hoping it was better than the misery I'd safely wrapped my life in. "I would like to trust you not to hurt the rose."





CHAPTER 17: CALLISTA

“I would like to trust you not to hurt the rose.”

The world blurred as I tried to blink back tears. For weeks, he had denied me any degree of trust, and now—to receive it so willingly—brought on a torrent of emotions.

And emotions meant tears.

But I wasn’t ready to cry. “I never meant to hurt it,” I whispered.

He stepped closer, into the middle of the doorframe. “I know. I can tell when you lie, remember?”

“But you didn’t trust me before.”

His voice lowered. “I have never allowed anyone into that cave before. That limit in your freedom, at least, was not specific to you.”

My eyes widened. “Nobody? Ever?”

He shrugged. “I let my cousins Robin and Guyan go in, but they’re both stuck outside the curse boundary now. The cave is a forbidden place because I want to protect the rose.” He glanced away.

“Did...” I almost stopped myself, but decided not to. He had to be used to me saying things as I thought them. “Did someone hurt it before?”

He brought his gaze back to mine. “I do not know. It is... suffering. I do not know if it is simply old or if it has been attacked somehow.”

“I don’t know much about roses, but maybe I can try to help it? I’m very good at growing lemons, and roses always grew easily near my lemon trees.”

A sad smile tipped the corners of his mouth. “It is kind of you to offer, but it is a magical rose. It does not respond to most things the same way a normal rose might.”

I smiled back, pleased that I knew a secret he did not. “I can see magic.”

His eyebrows raised slowly as the import of my statement sank in. “What do you mean?”

“I can see magic. If I had time to watch the rose, I might be able to see if the problem is with its magic. All I had time to notice before was the massive amount of bright magic around it, but if I focus on it closer I might be able to tell you something new. Even if I can’t fix it, maybe the diagnosis would help.”

I shrugged. “Or I could treat it like a normal plant. But if you’d like me to look at its magic, I can do that too.”

He bowed his head. “I would be grateful.”

“Maybe you would worry less if we went together?”

He raised his eyes again. “I do not worry at all. I would be honored if you let me come and watch, though. The plant is very important to me.”

I tipped my head at him, trying to understand. “You do not worry at all because I don’t want to torture you for your mistakes?”

“I do not worry,” he corrected, “because all evidence points to your honesty. I would be wasting energy if I spent it worrying about things that others want me to be upset about when I know they will not hurt me. I...”

He stepped closer, into my side of the doorway, and lowered his voice. “I will not hurt you, either.” They were such simple words, but they

thickened the air with unsaid implications. Did he mean he wouldn't hurt me tonight? Or *ever*? What if my brother came again?

"May I accompany you to the rose cavern?" he asked again.

"Of course." I was still trying to decide what he'd meant a moment ago, but he bowed again.

"Let me go announce your right to be anywhere you choose to everyone in the Dining Hall while they are gathered for the evening meal. Then I'll come back and take you to the rose cavern."

He waited for me to nod before turning away and leaving the room. How would his people respond to the idea of a fae running free through their fortress? I thought of Lady Carmine who had almost thrown some kind of awful magic at me and all the glares that had met me on my first night weeks ago.

Was it silly to try to avoid all of them? I liked Mylo. And Koan and Jolter. And the dress-maker Mylo had sent. And Anna. And little Jorlan. That was six elves who had been friendly to me and only one who had really almost hurt me. Unless you counted Koan and Jolter, but they were more like confused friends.

So odds were at least six to one that most elves would be friendly too.

Still, I'd rather the king's company through the fortress more than the risk of meeting another prejudiced elf. The theater had held at least three hundred elves—if there were three hundred people in the fortress, then odds were fifty of them would be trouble if I met them alone.

And those kinds of odds made me very happy to wait for an escort to leave the room.

Aedan returned fast enough that he could not have taken the time to eat while he was in the dining hall. He knocked on the hallway door and bowed again when I opened it.

"You don't have to bow every time we meet," I said. "I'm not royalty."

He gestured down the hall. "You have a royal status in my mind."

My heart did a quick little flip at such a sweet sentiment. It was a painful emotion, like a butterfly fluttering through a windstorm. I shouldn't be attracted to an elf who had done the things he'd done.

But I'd already decided not to hold his mistakes against him. And he was making more of an effort to be better than I'd ever expected.

Of course, it had only been a day since his confession. A few emotional words could not prove any degree of intent.

When we turned into the dark rose tunnel, a glowing ball of light appeared above our heads and floated just ahead of us. I huffed a small chuckle and pointed at it. "This, by itself, is an excellent reason for me to have waited for you to go into your rose cave."

"The light?" he asked. "Can't fae gather light?"

I almost snorted. "Yes, *fae* can gather light, but I'm half human, remember? I nearly tripped a dozen times when I came alone."

He tipped his head toward me, but kept walking. "Your human inheritance prevents you from gathering light?"

"My human inheritance prevents me from everything," I muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"I have the pointed ears of the fae. And the ability to see magic. Everything else about me is human." He would figure out that sad truth eventually, so it hurt nothing for me to just tell him.

"But your brother had magic fire?" He sounded confused.

I nodded. "Yes. He has the round ears of a human and all the power of a fae. It seems to be a very uneven distribution of power."

He nodded slowly. "So you can't *do* any magic?"

I shook my head. "Not unless you count *seeing* magic." I rolled my eyes. "Though that seems to get me in more trouble than anything else."

Aedan opened a door at the bottom of a spiraled tunnel. "How is that?"

I sighed. “I followed a trail of magic from Alastor into Hemlit and got in an argument with a drekkan. I followed a trail of fae magic into the basement after you said not to. I thought... I thought my ability to see my mother’s magic would help me find her, but instead it just brought me awful news.”

I paused to take a breath, and he said, “I am sorry.”

I stopped walking. “What?”

He took another step to stand in front of me. “I won’t keep bringing it up, unless you’d like me to, but I haven’t said this yet, and I want you to hear it from my lips. I am sorry for what I did to your mother. I am sorry for the deception, the mistake, and her death. I am sorry for what it meant for her and for you and for your brother. I will spend the rest of my life wishing I had been more patient and kind. I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I want you to know that I regret it more than anything else in my life.”

It was a short speech, but hearing the words from his mouth did make me feel better about my decision to push away the anger I felt at him. “Thank you. I... appreciate that.”

He nodded, and we continued down the stone corridors.

The final tunnel before the rose bush filled with the bright pink magic that I’d remembered from before. I slowed down to look at it closer. An abundance of magic here flooded my senses and made it hard to focus.

“Do you see something?” Aedan asked.

“Lots of magic,” I answered. “It’s hard to tell much about it because it’s so concentrated in the tunnel here. I’d like to get into the cave to try to see what’s going on.”

He led the way through the narrowing corridor until the root-bound walls were close enough for me to reach out and touch. Magic pulsed through the roots like blood in veins. It emanated away from the plant and filled the corridor.

I touched Aedan's back, and he turned toward me. "Do you not see or feel any magic in this tunnel?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I can feel it, but not well enough to manipulate it or diagnose anything about it. I cannot see anything besides stone walls with roots twining their way through the rock."

I nodded and tipped my chin forward.

We stepped into the cavern. It was just as incredible as before, but this time—knowing I was here with permission—made the experience entirely different. "I wish you could see what I see," I whispered.

He turned to me. "Will you describe it for me?"

"Of course." I pointed at the weeping willow-shaped rose bush on an organic pedestal in the center of the room. "The rose bush looks like a small tree covered with hundreds of flowers, but I can't even tell what color they are because there is so much bright pink fae magic glowing from the plant. It rises from the plant's essence like smoke rises from you when you're angry."

He faced the plant, as if trying to see what I described. "Does it change?"

I stepped closer to the tree. "The magic flows from the main rose bush like water flows from the top of a waterfall, down a set of cascades. The movement is slow, though, like... like a sunbeam." I grinned as I landed on the right analogy. "The bright pink magic flows like sunlight pouring across a mountain valley."

I spun to look at the roots. "It pulses through the entire plant like blood pulses through you or I, but as it pulses, it is so strong that it seeps through the plant walls and fills the space around it. That's why it's so concentrated in this room and the tunnel."

I stretched my hands out into the thick clouds of pink magic. "I don't know why a tendril of it reached all the way upstairs into the courtyard last week—right now, it seems to dissipate at the end of the nearest tunnel..."

My words faded as a new tiny sprout burst up from the ground and grew toward my extended fingers. In less than a minute, the small shoot reached

my knees. I bent down and lowered my hand to the two leaves at the top. They wrapped around two of my fingers, hugging them.

I rubbed the leaves with my thumb. “What is it?” I whispered at them. They didn’t say anything, but they held onto my fingers with an intensity that kept me still. I glanced at the king, who also stood perfectly still with his jaw agape.

I hummed my favorite growing song at the little sprout—the song I used to sing to my lemon trees. It was instinctual, a melody that came from my soul for the little plant. When I reached the chorus, I sang the words in a hushed voice.

*Find the strength you need to grow,
Find a gift I offer true—
Strength and health and happiness—
Find the power inside you.*

When I finished the words, the leaves released my fingers, settled into a more natural rose bush shape, and then erupted in a burst of fae magic that was even brighter than the big rose tree.

But was it really *brighter*?

As my eyes adjusted to the bright colors, I realized that the difference in the two pinks was not one of brightness, but one of dilution. The pinks that emanated from the rose bush tree were not only pink.

I turned to the king. “Aedan—” I started, but he ignored me and knelt in front of the new rose sprout.

He looked up at me. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

He caressed one of the new little leaves with more gentleness than I’d thought he was capable of. “You made a perfectly healthy sprout. The roots from the rose tree cover all of Hemlit, but they are especially strong in Sirun—the capital here. They often sprout new little rose bushes, but for the last thirteen years, every sprout has been sick or scraggly.”

He touched the little plant again. “This one is strong and beautiful.” Awe filled his voice. “Did you use magic on it?”

“I...” Could I have used magic on it without knowing? I hadn’t seen any, but that didn’t mean much. My sight was a fickle thing, especially if I wasn’t focused. “I don’t know. I do know that after I finished the song, it released a burst of pink magic more than twice as bright as the mother plant.”

I knelt down next to him and grabbed his arm, too excited about what I’d realized to keep a more proper distance. “But Aedan. There’s more. I didn’t notice it at first because everything in here was so bright compared to the dark corridors, but it’s obvious now. The pink that is coming from the mother plant is not a pure pink. There are dark violet wisps of magic inside it. They look sinister and cruel and feel like poison. There aren’t any in this little plant. That explains why it looks healthy to you...”

I pursed my brows together. “Though it does not explain why this plant doesn’t have any if the mother plant does.”

He placed a hand over the one I’d rested on his forearm. “Your song.” His voice caught, and he turned away from me. After a moment, he turned back. “You sang strength and health to it. You purged it of a poison.”

His warm hand over mine caught my breath. He wasn’t acting at all like a king tonight, and it made him terrifyingly attractive.

I suddenly realized I was holding his very powerful arm, and... he was holding my hand. Leather and cedar scents filled my head, and the heat that had first caught my breath now spread across my arms, making it hard to focus. “What kind of poison?”

His green eyes held mine. They were filled with so much hope and approval that it made my head swim. Did he not hate fae now? Or was it just me?

“Magic poison,” he whispered. “My aunt believes the unhealthy sprouts are the work of fae who killed my parents—that it’s tied to Radira and you. But she also believes you are evil... and I know she is wrong about

that.” The air between us charged with his simple declaration. He *knew* I was not evil?

My eyes burned as I refused to let the tears fall. A powerful king telling me I was not evil should not make me cry. My voice fell to mirror his volume. “How do you know that?”

He gave my hand a soft squeeze. “It is obvious to anyone willing to ask it honestly. I am sorry I refused to look before. I...”

He blinked and drew a shaky breath. “I confess I am not accustomed to apologizing or asking for things.”

I smiled. How many people had actually heard this king apologize? “Do not let that stop you. You are doing it wonderfully.”

A grin spread across his face—a strange cross between something hesitant and something feral, like it hadn’t been allowed on his cheeks before, but it wanted to run fierce and free. “Am I?”

I nodded, unsure if he was responding to me or asking something more.

He swallowed, and that feral smile turned more anxious. “Callista, would you please sing to my rose tree?”

Sing to his rose tree? Would it help? Could I purge it of whatever dark magic was swirling through its roots?

He squeezed my hand again. “I know I don’t deserve your help, but this rose bush protects all of Sirun and—in some ways—all of Hemlit. Its magic also strengthens and protects me, though, so I’ll understand if you don’t want to help it.”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t let a plant suffer poison if I could help it, regardless of who else benefited. But—”

I met his eyes. He was so hopeful that I worried he did not understand. “But I cannot say that it will help. I’ve always sung to plants, and I’ve had many die before. If there’s magic in my song, I’ve never been aware of it.”

“I will be grateful for any attempt you make, whether or not it works.” His voice had turned husky, like perhaps he, too, was fighting a tendency to

tears tonight.

I swallowed and squeezed his arm before moving away from him. “Let’s see what happens, then.”

He followed me up to the rose bush and stood beside me as I wrapped my hand around a branch, carefully dodging thorns. “The magic is so thick here,” I told him, “that I can feel it like waves cresting against me.”

He brushed a leaf with his thumb. “I can feel it too, but I cannot see anything besides the plant.”

“It’s so concentrated, that it looks like water at the top of a waterfall, just bursting with bright pink energy. But interspersed throughout it, like a foreign wisp of smoke inside a cloud, are tendrils of dark violet-colored magic. It feels fae, like the pink, but also different, like it’s malevolent and intent on destruction.”

Aedan raised his brows. “Are we touching it?”

I nodded. “It’s everywhere the pink is, but much less abundant, so I didn’t notice it until I compared the pink in the new sprout to the pink everywhere else.” I let go of the tree and faced him. “I don’t know if singing will help or not.”

“I know,” he said. “I won’t blame you if it doesn’t.”

I turned back around and reached for the branch—

“Stop!” A new voice interrupted. I spun to see who was talking, but Aedan ran in front of me, blocking my view... and taking a forceful hit of concentrated, powerful, dark purple magic.

Magic that had been heading straight for me.

When it hit Aedan, he crumpled to his hands and knees and gasped for breath.

Since when had he been willing to protect me? *Since the day you first met him*, a snarky voice in my head answered.

“Step away from the rose tree,” a tall newcomer commanded as she raised a threatening hand. I’d seen her once before—in the courtyard on my first day in Sirun. She’d appeared friendly then. Tonight, though...

Tonight she was attacking.

Aedan jumped in front of me again, and smoke started to rise off his body.

“Aedan,” the intruder instructed, “do not burn the rose tree!”

“Then stand down,” he said in a low, menacing tone. “She has come with me. *You* should not be here.”

“She has twisted your mind,” the woman said, “tricked you into trusting her so she could destroy the rose. It will weaken your magic!”

“Aunt Acantha,” he growled. “Drop your magic and leave this cavern.”

Aunt Acantha? Would he really attack his own aunt to protect me?

She stepped closer. “I am trying to protect you,” she hissed, “from a viper dressed as a sheep! I don’t know what she has done to your mind, but I will not let her destroy you!”

The smoke rising from Aedan thickened until small flames danced like a halo around his body. How did the heat not burn him?

That was a question for later... that and the way his magic vibrated like his aunt’s, and the way they both harmonized with the fae magic in the tree.

“She is not here to destroy anything.” Aedan’s voice carried the timber of the drekkan, and the threat of violence. I did not want to see him strike his aunt down out of fear for me. If the weight of my mother’s accidental death made him want to surrender his own life, what would a deliberate death of someone he knew do?

“Then take her away from this place,” Acantha said. “That is the closest I will come to compromising.”

Aedan growled again. “You have no right to tell me—”

I interrupted by whispering, “She doesn’t want to fight you. It’s not worth it, not here.”

He caught my eyes in his emerald gaze. “You are worth it to me,” he ground out.

Every emotion I’d ever possessed rushed through my chest in a flurry of uncontrolled chaos. I was worth something to him. But what? Did he care about me? And if so, as what? Another subject to protect? A sister? A friend? Something... more?

Acantha’s jaw dropped. “When you made that announcement at dinner, I worried that she had manipulated your emotions and decisions. I followed you here, and now I see that I should have been much, much more afraid.”

That wild grin from earlier crept back on his face. He turned from me to Acantha. “You should not let your fears dictate your actions, Aunt.”

He used my words. If my emotions had been chaotic before, they were unfettered anarchy now. He *quoted* me to instruct his aunt in kindness. And the glint in his eye told me he knew exactly what he had done.

He spread his arms to his sides and the flames blinked away. “But as a gesture of goodwill for both of you,” he said, “I will drop my magic first and we will all leave together.”

She dipped her head, and he guided me out with a hand between my shoulders. As we walked closer to his aunt, he kept his body between hers and mine. When we passed the last tendrils of smoky pink magic, he paused.

The tunnel had grown wide enough that two people could easily fit abreast, but he pulled me behind his aunt while blocking me from her with his body like a shield. Acantha stopped and turned to see what he was doing. With both of us facing him, he raised a hand to the stony, root-bound wall.

An instant later, a wall of magic fire burned from the floor to the ceiling of the tunnel, completely blocking anyone from entering the rose cavern.

He glanced at me but then focused his attention on his aunt. “Nobody is to enter the rose cavern without my explicit permission.”

Her chin twitched in a tiny nod. “I’ll set a guard.”

His eyes narrowed. “Set two.”





CHAPTER 18: AEDAN

Acantha insisted on accompanying us until we reached Callista's room. After the door closed, she turned to me. "We need to have a meeting to discuss this."

"We don't *need* anything, Aunt." I barely managed to keep my voice calm. "I am the king, and I will not tolerate your insubordination like that ever again." I stepped closer to her and lowered my voice. A little menace wouldn't hurt. "Nobody defies me the way you just did. The only reason you are still alive is because of our history together." Well, that and the fact that Callista made me want to give people second chances.

But Acantha did not need to know that. She stood her ground, staring at me with beady eyes. I loomed over her. "Despite all the help you've given me, if anyone besides the fae had seen what you did, I would have had to strike you down as an example."

Finally she took a step back and raised her hands placatingly. "You're right, Aedan. I should have approached the situation differently. But I am genuinely worried about you. I know you don't believe me, but I am asking you—begging you—to tell Mylo and Fagan how you feel. If we all find it troubling, would you consider the possibility of having been manipulated?"

I stepped backward as well. I could just incarcerate her and she would be out of my way, but... Callista's words came to my mind. *Give others a little grace.*

I sighed. "Fine. Bring them to my room."

She dropped into a curtsy that was deeper than normal for her and then glided down the corridor.

Once she was completely out of sight, I retreated to my room. I needed to remove all the evidence of my trauma-marked change of heart during the last two days, but before I started, Callista knocked.

I rushed to open the door and bowed. "I'm sorry for my aunt. She is—" I lost my train of thought when I saw Callista holding my dagger. Did she want to use it on my aunt? For attacking her? But that seemed out of character for the half-fae in front of me.

I recollected my thoughts. "She is prone to worry, but I've never seen her overreact so badly before." I glanced at the knife. "Do... you want to punish her?"

Callista's eyes widened. "No!" She shook her head. "The things you think! I thought you might want this back so the people in your meeting don't notice it missing and ask about it."

My lips twisted into a smile—I should have guessed she wanted something like that. I reached for it, but then stopped. A new idea grew in my mind, and I liked the way it felt.

Instead of taking the blade, I wrapped my hands over hers while they were still on the hilt. "I would like you to keep this. As a symbol of my determination to be a better person."

My voice caught, and I swallowed. Apparently a determination to be kind made one subject to more emotions. Or perhaps it was being the recipient of her kindness, as Fagan had said.

I squeezed her hands carefully. "I want to be more kind and to understand people better. I don't want my own fears and prejudices to determine my actions. I want to give people second chances."

I slid one of my hands off hers and onto the blade, turning it, so that I held the blade in one upturned palm and her hand—around the hilt—in my other upturned palm. “This blade was forged with flames from my grandfather, King Dustan, and ground with magic from my grandmother, Queen Ember. It has always been a symbol of power and precision to me, but I want to give it to you as a sign that I will not let power overrule benevolence.”

“It radiates power,” she whispered.

I pushed it closer to her. “Please. Keep it.”

She clutched it close to her chest. “Thank you.”

I blew out a soft breath, trying to diffuse the thick air between us. “On a different topic, it seems I will be having a meeting very shortly with my aunt and two other advisors.” I gestured at my room. “I need to clean up a bit before they arrive.”

She nodded, shaking off a little more of the charged moment. “I heard through the wall. I’ll be quick. I know you don’t have any good reason to trust me, but—”

I cut her off. “I have many good reasons to trust you.”

She tightened her fingers around the hilt of the knife and took a bracing breath. “Still, this will sound manipulative. But I promise it’s not. I just want to tell you what I saw.”

Now I was curious.

She talked faster. “Your aunt’s magic is the same color as the tendrils I saw darkening the rose’s pink magic. That pink magic is undiluted fae magic. I’m certain of it now. The dark purple—I’m not so certain. But your aunt’s magic is the same color.”

Her words came even faster now, like she was afraid of running out of time or getting interrupted. “That doesn’t really *mean* anything, and I want more time to think about it, but I wanted you to know in case she goes down there again by herself. There are only so many colors, so sometimes I see the same color for lots of different things, but I don’t like how it’s the

same color as magic that I thought was fae, but maybe isn't, and definitely had a malevolent feeling to it. Also—"

She paused for a breath, my mind started to process the things she'd said.

After one quick breath, though, she started again. "Also, the colors I see have a kind of movement to them. Magic doesn't hold still—it sort of vibrates. And her magic had a similar vibration to it as yours, and both of your magics harmonized with the magic in the rose. I don't know if it means anything. The only people I've seen with magic before I came here were Motab and Alastor, but I've seen enough elven magic here now to recognize the difference in fae and elf and... well, there's a kind of harmony in your family's magic and the tree."

I put up a hand. "Slow down, Callista. I think I know what you're seeing."

She raised her brows, and I almost laughed. Her curiosity was as intriguing as her unpredictability.

"My family has a connection with the rose tree," I explained. "It is tied to the ruling line, and each new king bonds with it when he takes the throne. But a portion of the power it gives us is passed to our children, so Acantha would have received some as the daughter of my grandfather. I received a portion when I was born, as the son of Fintan, the ruling king. My own bond with the plant ties our magic together."

She raised her chin and lowered it slowly as she paid close attention to my words. "Magic is an unpredictable thing," I added. "I don't know why everything always works the way it does, but I am not surprised to hear that her magic, mine, and the rose have things in common."

Hints of anxiety brushed against the edges of my awareness—*her* anxiety brushed against *my* awareness of the mistek bond between us. I searched for signs of stress in her face, but could not find any. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I hope not," she said, "but you need to prepare for your meeting. I'll leave you to it."

"Callista!" My hand jumped out to grab her elbow, but I stopped before I touched her. Still, she turned back around and raised a brow.

“Will you tell me what worries you, please?”

That brow arched even higher. “What worries me? Why do you assume—” She cut off and pressed a hand to her heart. “The bond. You can tell.”

I nodded. “Is it so wrong that I would like the opportunity to alleviate your anxiety?”

She smiled. “Not wrong at all. But I am trying to think before I speak and save my thoughts for the most appropriate time.”

I smiled back. “But I like hearing your thoughts.”

“Do you?” She wrapped both hands around the dagger hilt. “I’m afraid I tend to reprimand you.”

“I doubt you were holding back a reprimand just now.”

“No,” her voice dropped to a whisper. “I was not.”

“Please tell me. Surely I can help.”

Her eyes darted to the hall door in her room and then back to me. “Your aunt scares me.”

My stomach twisted at her confession. She was only here because of me, and I hated that she felt the need to fear anyone in my fortress.

I stepped closer to her and placed a hand on each of her shoulders like my own father used to do when he wanted me to hear something important.

“Callista.” I spoke in the drekkan’s deep tones, hoping it might help ground her fears. “I will not let her hurt you.” I squeezed her shoulders with the smallest amount of pressure. “I will not let anyone hurt you. Will you trust me in this?”

She nodded, but her nerves did not lessen.

I wrapped my magic around her door. Callista’s gaze followed my power. Unsure of what she saw, but knowing it was related to my magic, I explained. “I sealed your door with my magic. If anybody opens it tonight, I will feel it, and I will come to make sure you are safe.”

The tension I’d felt in the bond disappeared. “Thank you.”

I pulled away from her and bowed, retreating back to my room to prepare for Acantha.



Mylo's fingertips drummed silently against the table. His face was unusually difficult to read as Acantha listed her concerns. Even I had to admit, she'd made a convincing argument.

Fagan responded first. He also looked more somber than I'd expected. "So, in summary, you are concerned that the fae is manipulating Aedan because he wants to give her freedom to move about the fortress and because he defended her against your attack?"

Her chin dipped in a quick nod. "And he took her to the rose cavern. The Aedan we know would never allow such a security risk."

I raised my chin as I tried to hold back the disdain I felt for her violent, fear-based actions.

Fagan turned to Mylo. "Security falls under your purview. How dangerous do you think she is?"

Mylo switched from drumming to tapping his index finger only. He shifted his gaze from Fagan, to Acantha, to me, and then drew a slow breath. "I have no evidence that she is dangerous at all."

Acantha's eyes hardened. "What about the way she charms everyone she encounters? You think she's harmless, Aedan thinks she's helpless, even the D'aeran twins have given up their lawlessness for her! It's—"

She paused to scowl at Fagan as he smiled and shook his head slowly. Through her glare, she finished. "It's as clear a sign as dawn."

Fagan buried his humor. "I know I'm more a guest here than anything else, so I'll share my thoughts and let you decide what to do."

I smiled at him. “Your honesty has been a boon to me and my father. I appreciate your thoughts.”

“I’ve heard nothing but good things about her,” he said. “If she could affect everyone the way she’s affected the few who have seen her, I would turn her loose everywhere I could.”

“Not everyone loves her,” Mylo added. “I’ve had at least a dozen people ask me what I’m doing to protect the population from her.” He nearly rolled his eyes.

“Yes,” Acantha hissed, “but she charms everyone who speaks to her.”

Fagan’s eyes twinkled. “Apparently not you. Nor, I believe, Lady Carmine.”

“Even worse.” Acantha’s eyes widened. “She only charms elves with the potential to marry her.”

Mylo snorted. “I’m married, Acantha. As is Fagan.”

“He isn’t charmed.” She glared at Fagan again. “He’s just keeping his eyes closed because he doesn’t want to interfere too much.”

Fagan sighed. “If you’d like, I’ll speak with her tomorrow and let you know if I change my position.”

Acantha stood. “Acceptable.” She cast her gaze on each of us, but ended with me. “I’ll take my leave. I still need some sleep tonight.”

We all stood as she left. Mylo bowed and followed her, but Fagan stayed standing at the table. “A word, Your Majesty?”

“Of course, Fagan. Any time.”

“I would... caution you with regards to Acantha.”

I raised a brow. “Because she attacked Callista?”

His eyes slanted as he considered his words. “Perhaps. But more so because she did not get her way today. Not in the rose cavern, and not here tonight. She has never chased down the power of the throne, but... she

does not like to be wrong. Or put in a place of less power than she has assumed.”

This was a side of my aunt I had not seen. “She’s always been supportive of me.”

“And you’ve always given her free rein to do whatever she wanted. Others who have crossed her have disappeared. I don’t think she’d do anything to you, but... I would be wary of what she might do to Callista.”

I clenched a fist. “I will not allow that.”





CHAPTER 19: CALLISTA

A dissonant twang filled my room as I tried strumming a new chord on the lute Koan had brought me weeks ago. Or had it been months now? I'd been practicing every day, but even the most basic chords still sounded awful. I set the instrument on my bed when an unfamiliar knock hit my door.

I opened it but didn't recognize the elf who filled the doorway. He had a tall, powerful build, but the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth only came from years of smiling; and since he was an elf, it must have been a lot of years.

He dipped his head in a polite greeting. "Good morning. My name is Fagan. I was hoping you might be willing to accompany me on a walk through the gardens."

I slid to the side enough to look over his shoulder and meet Jolter's eyes. "I'm pleased to meet you, Fagan, but I'll only go for a walk with you if Jolter thinks it's wise."

Fagan's eyes nearly sparkled with mirth as he turned his body to let Jolter into the conversation. "By all means. I'm happy to defer to your guard."

Jolter straightened and nodded a few times, as if weighing dozens of arguments. “I think it’s a great idea if Fagan promises to keep you safe. Otherwise, I’ll have to come along.”

Fagan sobered and bowed at Jolter. “I’ll absolutely protect her and bring her back safely within an hour.”

Jolter puffed out his chest and looked so proud that I would not have been surprised if his buttons popped off his shirt. “Good.” He winked at me. “I think it’s about time you went outside.”

Fagan glanced at my bell sleeves and exposed forearms. “The sun is out today, but I’d still suggest a cloak.”

Mylo’s dressmaker had left me with both a cloak and a jacket with long tails that flared like a dress. The jacket was thicker, so I put it on. Fagan waited in the hall and, when I returned, he offered me an elbow. “May I?”

I slipped my hand on his arm, and he reached over and patted it carefully, just like my father used to do when he took me for walks. The memory was more poignant than normal, but I pushed it away and focused on my new escort.

“Master Fagan,” I started, but then realized my potential mistake. “I’m afraid you might be one of the higher ranking elves to visit me. Do you have a title you’d like me to use?”

He chuckled, exercising those faint wrinkles. “No, no, my dear. Fagan is fine. You needn’t bother with *Master*. I’m far too old for that nonsense.”

I tipped my head, curious. “How old are you?”

He laughed again. “Nobody told me you were impertinent.”

I felt a flush run up my neck. “I didn’t mean to be impertinent. Technically, you brought up your age first.”

“Indeed.” He didn’t sound offended. “I’m not bothered by it, even if other elves might be. I am just over 4,000.”

My eyes widened. “Really? You look amazing!”

His laughter spurred another embarrassed flush. I really needed to speak slower. And think first. The king might not be bothered by my uncensored thoughts, but this elf commanded authority too. I didn't want to insult the first noble I met who acted like a noble.

"Your compliments, Callista, are rather unpredictable."

I could not think of anything else to say as he led me through the tulip tunnel, out the grand main entrance, and down a path that led to large, sprawling patches of snow with vines, barren trees, and several fountains. The largest fountain had a spout of water that cascaded down three levels of small pools before disappearing underground. Sunlight sparkled off the water and the patches of snow.

Fagan gestured at a bench in front of the water, and we sat. "The fountains are enchanted to flow all winter, regardless of how cold it gets."

I smiled. "They are beautiful." But what was this elf's purpose? Was it some kind of trick? A trap? Was he delaying now, waiting for someone to join us? "I'm sorry for the blunt question, Fagan, but why did you want me to come out here with you?"

His lips shifted naturally into a sad smile. "Am I so transparent?"

"No," I said. "I have no idea what you want, and the suspense is going to make me crazy."

A great shadow passed over our heads, and I looked up to see the king's black drekkan form flying low over us. Relief swept over me. Fagan would not have brought me here to kill me with the king watching. And if he had meant to, or if someone else meant to have him trap me for them, the king would not allow it.

Was I so sure of the *honorable beast*? He had flown out of sight, but he let out a mighty roar.

Yes. Yes, I was.

Next to me, Fagan sighed. "I'm sorry, my dear. I am here because I told Acantha I would visit you and determine how dangerous I thought you might be. I thought this would be a comfortable place for a conversation."

A bright red bird flew into a small bush that still had deep green leaves. A scarlet tanager. The same kind of bird I'd first seen on the day I came here. I'd found it in my father's book. It flitted around the bush, pecking at bugs while I spoke. "It is a nice spot. Why don't you ask me everything you've wondered, and I'll just tell you. It would be easier than both of us trying to guess at each other's thoughts. Then you can hear all my answers and judge them for yourself."

Amusement filled his voice. "What if you enchant your answers so I'm persuaded to look past the most superficial information?"

I shrugged. "I can't actually do that. But if you can't believe anything I say because you think that I can, I don't know how a conversation will help you."

He followed my gaze to the bird. "I believe the tanagers are one of the species that cross the borders between our lands and the humans. Chipper little things, aren't they?"

"Are you a fan of birds, Fagan?"

"I've been around long enough to be a fan of many things." He brought his gaze back to me. "I'm not actually an interrogator, Callista. I'm an observer. I came into Hemlit many decades ago as a spy for Floren, but I grew tired of the pettiness of the work. I told King Fintan—Aedan's father—my assignment, and we made a new arrangement."

"You told the king you were spying on him?"

"It sounds absurd when you say it like that, but yes." The older elf smiled. "I wanted to go home to my family."

"Did he let you?"

"He did. I stayed for some time to gather the information I'd been assigned, but eventually I went home. When Aedan's parents died, I came back to see if I could be of assistance to the new king. I knew him well and... I was concerned he would not have the support he needed."

I studied him. "What do you mean?"

He met my eyes. “Fintan was a fair king, but he emphasized the importance of a king’s duties to his son. He assumed Aedan would naturally tend to be benevolent because of his sweet mother, so he drilled him in duty and justice. They died far too soon, long before Aedan had time to realize that Fintan made exceptions for every rule.”

So Aedan’s honorable monster had been drilled into him by his father? I wished the man were still alive so I could shake him. Thoughts of my own father filled my head—singing to me, laughing with me, walking with me, holding me. “Did his father love him?” I asked.

“He did.” Fagan tapped a finger on his knee a few times. “But he did not show it in a way that would encourage Aedan to be... soft.” A drekkan cry arched across the sky. We both glanced toward it. “Aedan shows he cares about people by protecting them.”

I turned my eyes back to Fagan. “Why would you tell me this?”

He met my eyes. “Because Aedan cares about you.”

A warm, melty feeling filled my stomach and fluttered up into my chest. Aedan’s words from last night replayed in my mind. *I will not let anybody hurt you.* Was it possible? Could the terrifying and powerful elf king have something as human as feelings for me?

And if so, why would Fagan care? “I still don’t see how that brings us here,” I said.

Fagan’s sweet, gentle smile tipped his eyes up. “It brings us here because Acantha saw it and worried. I saw it, and it gave me hope.”

My eyebrows shifted together. “Hope for what?”

“Hope that you can help him heal. He has not been the same since his parents died.”

I wanted to be more sympathetic, but his words only reminded me of my own loss. “Neither have I.”

His head turned, curious. “When did your parents die?”

“Thirteen years ago.”

“Thirteen years ago?”

Clearly he recognized the date. “Yes, thirteen years ago. And since Aedan has clearly not told you yet, it was my mother that cursed him.”

His jaw dropped. “Did you know?”

“No.” The air suddenly felt more chilled, so I drew the jacket tighter around me and turned away. “He only told me a little more than a week ago.” I broke the growing silence with a clarification. “And technically, my father died two years before that.”

He didn’t respond for at least a minute, so I turned back to face him. “I’m sorry, Callista,” he said softly. “That must have been a horrible thing to learn after you volunteered to come here.”

I nodded. Yes, it was. It still made me fight back tears when I thought about it.

Fagan stood up abruptly and offered me his arm again. “Walk with me?”

We left the fountain, passed the bushes where several tanagers now skimmed for food, walked past snow-covered gardens and through a few rows of barren trees. On the other side of the trees, the stone pillar the fortress sat on disappeared. It gave way to sheer cliffs that dropped for hundreds of feet into the lake with giant crabs.

I shivered at the memory and took a step away from the edge. Fagan stepped back with me, but patted my hand. Did he hate me now that he knew my mother’s curse had trapped him here? Did he blame me for getting him stuck in Hemlit, away from his family? Did he intend to push me over the edge?

The distance to the lake suddenly took a dizzying tilt, and I tightened my hold on Fagan’s arm. I hoped that did not doom me to an early death, but I didn’t have anything else to hold. A wave of nausea nearly took me down, but Fagan kept me on my feet.

And then the drekkan’s shadow landed on us again. He flew slowly overhead, and I focused on him. He’d felt my worry again... and I was not even mad about it.

“Here, step back,” Fagan said. “I thought you would enjoy the view, but I’m afraid you nearly passed out.” I risked a glance at his face as he pulled me away from the edge. “We’ll just put stunning vistas on a list of things that do not help you relax.”

“I’m sorry,” I panted. “I seem to have developed a selective fear of heights.” It was a horrible thing. One painful example of how disasters followed me everywhere.

He huffed. “A troublesome condition when you live on top of a stone pillar.”

I shivered. “You have no idea.”

“Let’s get you back inside before Jolter starts to worry.”

I snorted, but said the first thing I would have told Alastor if he’d been in this position. “You’re just worried I’ll pass out and you’ll have to carry me back up.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth as soon as I’d said the words. It was far too irreverent a tone for such a high noble.

He laughed out loud. “You must think I’m quite pathetic.”

“No...” My mind raced for something to say that would make up for teasing someone who outranked me by about ten thousand steps.

“Well, let me assure you,” he said, “I would have no trouble carrying you. I am much more concerned about my suspicion that if you panicked about the edge of the pillar, the king would be aware of that stress and decide that you need protecting from me. And I’d prefer not to be the target of his protective nature, especially when he is in his drekkan form.”

We’d reached the great stone staircase that led into the castle. “So you’re taking me back to my room?”

“Yes. Will that help you relax?”

I chuckled now, and glanced at him. “You were right. You are a terrible interrogator.”

A soft round laugh drifted down from him. “But I *am* an excellent observer. And I’ve decided you do not pose a danger to Aedan.”





CHAPTER 20: AEDAN

I lost Callista. She was not in her room. I knocked again to be sure, but I didn't even hear rustling or walking. And it was dinner time. Usually the twins at least visited with her while she ate, even if they saved their meal for the dining hall.

But I heard nothing.

I felt nothing either. Maybe the faintest background anxiety, but no more than when she tried to play that wretched lute. I really should do something about that.

I had to find her first.

I should have relaxed knowing that she was not stressed. That should have indicated she was safe. But I did not like not knowing where she was. There were too many people in the fortress who I did not trust to be near her. Perhaps I should have stayed in the room again today...

No. It had been good for me to be outside when Fagan had taken her to the gardens. I did not know how someone as gentle as Fagan could have made her nervous, but I felt her calm down when I flew by.

And now she was missing.

I stormed onto the dais in the dining hall. Fagan, Mylo, and Acantha stood as I approached our table. “Where is she?”

I intended the words to come out as a soft menace, but a hush spread across the entire hall as soon as I finished. Maybe I growled a little.

“I assume you mean Callista?” Fagan practically whispered—nobody in the main hall could have heard him.

“Who else would I have meant?” I made no attempt to whisper.

My favorite advisor inclined his head politely. “Jolter told me he and Koan would be guarding her until after dinner. They did not intend to spend the night in the hall unless Mylo asked them to.”

I scanned the hoard of tables below me. She would never agree to eat with them—she thought they all hated her.

Fagan stepped closer to me and lowered his voice even more. “Your Majesty, can you not tell if she is in distress?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. I would not confirm such a thing in front of Acantha. He should have known better than to ask. “I will not eat until I know she is safe.”

Corridors and rooms blurred past me as I stalked the fortress halls. Where was she? How could Koan and Jolter have not reported their plans to Mylo? Why—

A shot of laughter trickled down a hall where a kitchen servant came from. He bowed to me awkwardly over an empty tray, and then hurried toward the kitchen. I pushed aside my annoyance at the servant’s obvious discomfort around me—I’d only ever protected my people—and pressed into the hall.

The servant had closed the door behind him, but Koan’s laughter filtered through the wall. I reached for the door, ready to throw it open and demand Callista’s location, when I heard a feminine laugh. It wasn’t loud or carefree like Koan’s carefully honed performative expressions, but it was cautious and genuinely entertained.

And it sounded like it could have come from Callista.

Had I never heard her laugh?

I froze with my hand above the door handle and listened. What could have brought a happy sound to her lips?

“You should have seen the cook, though.” Jolter’s slightly more subdued voice joined the fray. “I don’t think he’d ever seen anyone walk into his kitchen on his hands before.”

Callista laughed again, along with several others. I tipped my head against the door so I could hear better. As the laughter died down, she sighed.

“This was so lovely. I’m glad you convinced me to come.”

A new voice answered. “We’re glad you came too. You’re the first human or fae I’ve met.” Hemmer. Another young elf trapped inside the curse, but one who did not normally spend much time in the fortress.

“What he means is, thank you for the invitation.” Jemma, Hemmer’s sister. “We should probably cross the bridge before it gets too late.”

“If you want to stop by the dining hall and visit with anyone else, you can,” Koan said. “We’re going to take Callista back to her room, but we’ll go kick up the party there for a bit before we go to bed.”

Interesting. Koan was spending time with lesser nobles now.

“You don’t want to go to the main hall?” Hemmer asked.

Callista answered. “No. Most of the elves there hate me.”

“Not most,” Jolter corrected. “Just a few that are loudly obnoxious about it.”

She huffed. “Still no.”

Chairs scraped the floor, and I darted down the hall and around the corner. They did not need to know I’d been there.



An hour later I approached her room with a plate of lemons. Mylo stood in the hall and made a pointed look at the fruit in my hand. “Are those... lemons?”

I raised my chin, daring him to challenge my right to have lemons in my own fortress.

“Isn’t it a little early for lemons?”

My eyes skittered down the hall. It was unnecessary, but they wanted to confirm nobody was listening. “I had the greenhouses move a lemon tree inside and begin nudging it to ripen early several weeks ago.”

His left cheek lifted in a far-too-entertained smirk. “Your Majesty, if you’d like to win the lovely fae’s favor, I could make several suggestions that would go over better than the most sour fruit we grow.”

A growl almost escaped my throat. “I happen to know she likes them.”

He laughed as he bowed his head. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

My growl would have had anyone besides Mylo running for cover. He just kept laughing as he waved at her door. “Let me know how it goes.”

I looked down my nose at him. “You’re dismissed. I’ll secure her room for the night. Make sure someone is here before I go to the gardens to shift in the morning.”

Once Mylo was gone, I knocked on Callista’s door.

Her eyes widened when she saw me, but then they settled onto my plate of lemons, and her whole face exploded in a smile. Her hands flew to her mouth, and she smiled through her fingers. And I...

I felt her happiness. It bubbled through the mistek bond like a light and airy mist, an emotion so strong it bled into the cursed magic that tied us together. Fear and pain had been the only emotions I’d felt through the bond until now. Why hadn’t I felt her happiness before?

Because she hadn’t been so happy since she came here. The realization hit me like a sledgehammer in the gut, making me want to crumple but also to stand and find something else to give her a little more joy.

I lifted the plate toward her. “I brought you some lemons.”

Her smile was so big, so genuine, and so full that it swept my breath away. What would it be like to smile with your whole face?

She took the plate with one hand and used her other to raise a lemon to her nose and inhale all its tart citrus aroma. I assumed she intended to eat them, but... was she going to bite into it?

“Do you eat the peels?” I asked.

Her nose wrinkled and she laughed. “No. Normally I— Well, honestly, I do a lot of things with them.”

“Like what?”

She rubbed the lemon with a thumb. “In the summer, I’ll put them in rice or cakes or tarts or, my favorite, is in lemonade.”

“Lemonade? Is that a drink?”

“Is that a drink?” Her jaw dropped. “What kind of question is that?”

“I can’t imagine drinking lemons.”

She chuckled. “What do you do with them?”

“We use the oils to make soaps and candles. It smells lovely, but it does not taste good.”

She laughed, stepped away from her room, and closed the door behind herself.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We’re going to have a cultural experience.” Her laughter turned shy, but she met my eyes. “Will you take me to your kitchens and enjoy some lemonade with me? Please?”

“Of course.” I would do anything she asked. Had she not realized that yet? Jolter had. I offered her an arm, and she tucked her hand inside my elbow.

We’d only gone a few steps when she asked, “Lemons aren’t toxic to elves, or anything like that, are they?”

I chuckled. “No, not that I’m aware of. Why do you ask?”

She blew out a quick burst of air and stepped a little faster. “I don’t want to poison you just because I like lemons. We’re not exactly the same... I mean, there must be some differences in elves and fae and humans... right?”

She looked up at me, and those bright blue eyes lit a fire in my chest. Her words asked me to confirm that we were different, but I could not do it. All I saw was a person I wanted to love. A person who made my heart burn. “Firehawk,” I whispered.

She tipped her head, and her smile returned. “What?”

A smile grew on my face. She normally put on such a show of confidence that I found her confusion immensely entertaining. “You’re a firehawk.”

She turned away from me and kept walking. “I don’t think I know that bird.”

“They’re gorgeous,” I explained. “Stunning birds with impressive spirit and fight, bold, resourceful hunters, but also sometimes problematic. They’ve been known to start fires deliberately.”

She pulled her hand out of my elbow and walked faster. “I do not start fires.”

I grinned. “I think you do. And they’re big, beautiful—”

She turned and faced me with glassy eyes, and I stopped talking.

She blinked furiously and her voice quivered. “Fine. Maybe I do. But maybe those fires aren’t all disasters. Maybe sometimes they’re good.”

What had I done? “Callista, I— I think I implied something that I did not mean to...”

A sadness slipped through the bond, choking out my words. *I’d* made her sad. “I meant everything I just said as a good thing. I don’t know how—”

“In what world is starting fires a good thing? You specifically said it was problematic.”

“They do it to chase prey out of the grasses. It’s incredibly clever.”

“Then why *problematic*?”

“Callista, you’re not problematic—”

“I know very well that I’m problematic.”

“What?”

“I know that I start fires! I know that almost everything I do ends in disaster. I don’t need you to reinforce that!”

“Woah.” I stopped walking. “I do not think that at all.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“Because—” I could not tell her that she lit my heart on fire. She deserved better than to deal with a broken, cursed king falling for her. But I could not have her thinking that I thought that she was a walking disaster.

I turned her toward me and held her shoulders while my mind scrambled for the right words. She stared at the plate in her hands, so I whispered.

“Because you have a strength that lights up the darkest corridors.”

Her breath stilled, like she was holding it, waiting to see what I would say next.

“Firehawk. You have a brightness that burns through the shadows that obscure happiness and kindness. You have chased those sweet moments out of hidden corners and into the open.” She lifted wary eyes up until they met mine. “We...”

No, I would not hide behind general group language when she risked everything she was every moment she was here. “I have needed your brazen flames.”

“Really?” she breathed.

I nodded. “Yes. I swore, thirteen years ago, to never lie—or deceive the way I did then—again. Whatever else you might wonder, do not question this: I appreciate what you’ve done since you’ve come here.”

She relaxed her shoulders and tipped her lips into a small smile. “Thank you.”

I dipped my head. “It is the truth.” I pointed a hand down the hall. “Now, do I get to sample this... is it a fae or human drink?”

“Human.” She looped her arm back in mine, sniffed, and talked again. “Well, I think the fae have a different version that they mix with some kind of magical liquors or something, but the story is my grandmother loved lemons because they were one of very few fruits that grew in both her native fae kingdom and here. She died when my mother was young, but not too young to have learned to love lemons. Then, my mother married a human and moved to the other side of the river, and he introduced her to lemonade.”

Her voice warmed with a smile. “She might have added magic to it or something, but I can make it very close to how she did, which—” She tipped her head at me and gave me a side-eye. “—is actually a big deal because most of the things I try to make do end in a disaster. Alastor has been using magic to help with my cooking for thirteen years.”

“Ah, I see the... um... source of our miscommunication.”

She ducked her head. “I... might be a little sensitive about it. That, and—” We stopped in front of the kitchen door, but I did not open it. I wanted her to finish what she was saying. “—and I do make a lot of disasters. Just since you’ve met me—I thought I’d rescue Alastor, and I ended up getting bound to a drekkan. I thought I’d found my mother, and I nearly got roasted by giant crabs.” She shrugged.

I shook my head. “You did save your brother. I—” Shame burned my throat, but I would be honest with her. “I would have killed him if you hadn’t come. And the rose bush did lead you to information about your mother, to my eternal dishonor. You have also helped the D’Aeran twins grow up and... you’ve helped me. Do not make light of the good you’ve done.”

A loud voice came through the kitchen door just before Forten threw it open. “What’s going on out— Oh! Your Majesty.” He bowed and glanced

at Callista before returning his focus to me. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Have you met Callista?”

She dropped into a quick curtsy and bobbed her head. He returned her gesture with a bow, nearly as deep as the one he gave me. “I’m Forten, Head Cook at Sirun.”

She grinned. “I’m Callista, resident Firehawk and lemonade lover.”

He relaxed into a smile. “I, too, love the firehawks, though I do not usually bring them into my kitchen.”

I leaned closer. “I invited Callista to show me how a human drink called lemonade is made.”

His eyebrows pressed together. “Your Majesty, I don’t normally allow *anyone* in my kitchen. I would never refuse *you*, but—”

I did not let him finish. “Then you will bring us in now and show us everything she needs.”

He dipped his head, but Callista set a hand on my forearm. “Master Forten, I don’t need much. If you’d rather, I’d be happy to carry the supplies back to my room.”

His expression flitted anxiously from her to me. “I wouldn’t want to create any trouble for you. Come in.”

Her hand tightened on my arm, and even though I wore sleeves, the contact thrilled me. After everything, she still touched me. And her touch made it clear that we were not going to impose on the cook.

“It’s no trouble,” she said. “All I need are some glasses, water, sugar, and forks.” I should have known she would insist on making the elf comfortable.

His anxious look shifted to a kinder smile. “What if I gather the supplies for you and set you up on a counter away from where I’m working? I find myself curious about this human drink. Perhaps you would let me taste it too?”

She grinned. "I would love to."

He opened the door wider. "I have three cooks who help me, but besides us, nobody else has been in these kitchens for years. You are about to see one of the great secrets of Sirun."

Was that true? Despite being the High King of Hemlit, had I really not seen the inside of the kitchen of my own fortress?

He was right. The last time I could remember walking through these doors was as a youth with Robin. Forten waved at his cooks and spoke to Callista. "All four of us have a lot of practice with fire magic, but each of us also has another skill that helps the process. Ruby has an unusual sense of smell and can predict how flavors will mix based on it. Baryl is gifted with plants and can manipulate vegetables and grains to a degree most others cannot."

A shorter elf looked up from a griddle with flatbread on it. "Mena is rather secretive about her magic, so I'll let her share if she gets a chance."

"And what about you, Master Forten?" Callista asked.

"I have some unusual skills with matter. It is most helpful in aging and marinating meats. I can speed the smoking process for a lamb, from all day to half an hour."

"That's amazing." She scanned the busy kitchen. I'd forgotten how large it was. The four elves each had plenty of workspace, and the walls were lined with pots and pans organized by size.

Forten brought her to a bar stool behind a counter. "We have the best setup a cook could wish for, though sometimes the team wishes we had premade treats to keep them energetic. The evenings get busy here." He handed Callista a knife and a small pitcher, and then he turned around and gathered supplies from cupboards and shelves.

Callista cut a lemon in half and handed it to me. "Do you want to do the honors?"

I took it from her. "Do the honors?"

“Of squeezing the juice into the pitcher.” She cut another lemon in half and demonstrated. I copied her, pressing three times as much juice out as she did. She laughed and handed me her halves. “Maybe you should do them all. I never considered my hands as weak until just now.”

“It is hardly a fair comparison.” I squeezed the juice out of all six lemons as she handed me the halves. “Elves are known for being stronger than humans, and you said you’re basically a human with fae ears.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve been told to keep my heritage a secret, you know. My parents said it was dangerous for people to know. I was awfully mad at you for announcing it the moment we arrived here.”

I emptied the last lemon of all juice. “I apologize. I did not realize at the time. I will refrain from announcing it now.”

She laughed. “It hardly matters now. Everyone here knows.”

Forten returned with a smirk, clearly listening to our conversation. He gestured at the pitcher. “Is this just lemon juice so far?”

She nodded and took a glass mixing bowl. “I’m going to add the water and sugar in here—if one of you could heat it up so it dissolves into a sort of syrup, that would be perfect.”

I pointed a finger at the mixture, more for her benefit than anything. I could heat a mixture without gesturing. I added the heat unevenly, so it forced the sugar water into a stirring motion that dissolved quickly.

She grinned. “That would be so handy.”

I raised a brow. “Heating water?”

“Magic, in general. Anyway—” She poured the syrup into the lemon juice. “This obviously makes it taste better, since your elven tongues prefer sweets.”

“My *elven tongue* enjoys many foods that are not sweet,” I corrected.

“Sorry,” she said, stirring the mixture with a long fork. “What drinks do you enjoy, again, that are not sweet?”

We had many teas, but I did add sugar to them.

She set her fork down and gave me a triumphant smile. “Exactly.”

Forten blurted out a gusty laugh, and I threw a glare at him.

“Sorry, Your Majesty. I just... I’ve never...” He turned to Callista. “Is that everything?”

“No, we’ll want a little more water and ice, if you like your drinks cold.”

Forten filled a cup with water and handed it to her. While she added it to the pitcher, he said, “I can remove heat from the pitcher when you’re done, as can the king.”

She chuckled. “Of course. I should have remembered.” She raised her eyes to me, and I chilled the drink.

“That’s it, gentlemen,” she declared. “Lemonade!”

So she sweetened the lemons to make them palatable—not so different from what we did to tea. I poured three glasses, nearly to the brim. Normally, I would have excluded Forten, but Callista had brought him into our *cultural experience*.

“Those are very full glasses for never having tried it before,” she said with a lilt to her voice that almost suggested she was teasing. Had anyone teased me before? Not since Robin had been here.

“I told you I would enjoy it,” I reminded her.

She burst into such a laugh that I felt it through the bond. That was twice in one night. I was both proud to have managed it, but also concerned that I did not understand the source of her humor well enough to duplicate it.

She was still so unpredictable to me... though I did not hate it the way I had at first. It felt more like a challenge—a mystery to unravel. What made her happy? What made her laugh?

I raised my glass in a small cheer. “To better understanding.”

“Hear, hear!’ Forten added his.

Another burst of Callista's heated happiness traveled through the bond as she added, "And friends in new places."



The next twenty minutes had left a nearly constant flow of hopeful happiness in Callista—I wanted to stay in the kitchen forever and listen to her laugh and chat with the cooks. She'd insisted on sharing with all four of them, and everyone liked the human drink enough that we mixed up another pitcher of it.

Eventually, though, Forten told us he was falling behind. When he abandoned our party, Callista insisted we leave so we did not make the cook's job too difficult. It was strange to be forced to consider the difficulty of the work of people in my castle that I had never worried about before, but as we traveled back to our rooms, such thoughts kept breaking into my mind.

I'd considered the cooks' safety. I worked hard for it. I wanted all my servants, regardless of their pay, to be safe. I'd felt bad for every family and schedule I'd disrupted with my curse. But I'd never thought of their convenience outside of the barrier's separation.

As we entered our corridor, I slowed. I'd enjoyed knowing her emotions had been positive tonight, but I also knew the nature of the magic that bound us... and it wasn't kind or just.

And if justice and kindness were objects of my pursuit, I needed to do something about it.

With Callista's hand on my arm, it was easy to stop her a few feet away from her door.

She turned to face me. "Thank you, Aedan. I've really missed that, and it was a lot of fun to share it with you and the others."

My mind was preoccupied with how to explain my thoughts, so I just nodded in response. How did one bring up something as awkward as a slave bond?

“Well, goodnight, then.” She let go of me and started toward her door.

I grabbed her arm. “Wait, Callista. Please.” I slid my hand down to hold hers, a desperate attempt to delay the words that had not organized themselves in my mind yet.

She froze, almost too still.

I dropped her hand. “I... need to talk to you.”

She turned back to look at me, concern etching in between her eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“No, I... Actually, yes. Yes, something is wrong.” That was as good a way to begin as any. “I will not hurt you, Callista, not now, not ever.” I took a step closer to her. “I would do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

A small smile turned her lips up, just barely touching her eyes. “I believe you. But I don’t see how that’s something wrong.”

“Because you are here specifically as collateral. Your entire presence is based on the idea that I will...” I couldn’t say it. It was so gross that it turned my stomach. The elf I was a few weeks ago made me sick.

I shook my head. “I want to free you from our agreement. I don’t care if your brother comes and burns down my roses. You will be safe from me and anything or anyone I can protect you from.”

She blinked, and tears rushed the edges of her eyes, but a flood of happiness spilled into the bond. She brought a hand to cover her trembling lips. “Thank you,” she whispered into her fingers. “That means more to me than I think you can possibly know.”

My heart lunged for those tears. I hated to see her cry, and it seemed like such a conflict with the feelings I could identify in the bond. I stepped even closer, and dried her cheeks with my thumbs, brushing the back of her hand—still over her mouth—with my palm.

“There’s more,” I whispered. “The mistek bond is a corruption of magic. Bonds between elves are meant to be beautiful, shared experiences. Twisting the magic into a bond of submission is wrong.”

She sniffed. “But you haven’t made me submit at all. Ever. Not once. You must have an enormous amount of control of your magic, because even in your bossiest moments you never used any magic to force me to do anything.”

A soft, disgusted grunt escaped me. “An honorable beast, huh?”

A deep, small chuckle lodged in her throat. “It would seem.”

I shook my head slowly, brushing another rogue tear off one of her cheeks. “It’s not enough. I would like to remove the bond entirely. Will you let me put my hand on your back?”

She stepped away from me, pressing her back to the door. My hands fell away from her face, and she shook her head quickly.

“Why? I—” I had stepped closer to her without thinking and reached for her face again. She closed her eyes, so I stopped, frozen by her uncertainty. “Why would you not want to be free?”

Her eyes opened, the clear blue crystals covered with a light sheen of moisture. “Your offering means everything,” she whispered, “but... how did you know that I needed help with the karkins on the bridge?”

“I felt your fear.”

“Through the bond?”

I nodded.

“What about when Lady Carmine threatened me?”

I nodded again.

“Or when I was scared on the balcony?”

Another nod.

“Or the very first night when I was frightened in the dungeon?”

My neck burned, but I nodded again. I could tell where she was going with this, and I did not like it.

“So, you have essentially rescued me at least four times because the bond alerted you to my danger. I don’t want to give that up. I... need you.” My heart sank. I did not want her to need me to be a monster. “Especially if you care enough to keep me safe the way you just promised, I need you to know when I need that help.”

How was I supposed to become a better elf if she insisted I do horrible things? “So you want me to remain unjust and cruel? I’m sure I can protect you without it.”

She shook her head, but her voice wavered. “You wouldn’t have known I was in trouble before without the bond. It is neither unjust nor cruel if you do not take advantage of its dark possibilities. You are actually showing an even greater kindness by refusing the possibilities that are in front of you. By resisting the bad and using the good.”

My temper roared to life. I stepped closer to her and hissed, “It is a perversion of goodness.”

“It’s your own fault!” she hissed back. I fell back on my heels, and she attacked. Her tiny firehawk nature reared to life. “You made coming here my only choice. The cursed barrier has regrown, so I cannot go home. If you take away the bond now, I’ll have no way to reach out when things go wrong. No option besides screaming and hoping someone within hearing range cares enough to help.”

My heart twisted at that image. No, I could not leave her alone like that.

“If that is what you want,” she added, “fine. You are the king.” She stepped away from the door and closer to me. Very close. Our chests nearly touched, and I could easily reach her back. The air between us charged. I wanted to wrap my arms around her—both to keep her away from dangers and keep her to myself. But I did not have permission for that.

So I stood still, waiting to see what her purpose was. “You are the king,” she repeated, “And I am just a girl who crossed your path—”

I could not ignore that. I gripped her shoulders as carefully as I could with the heat running through my veins. “There is nothing *just* about you.”

“Regardless,” she breathed at me, “your will supersedes mine. You have all the control here. Do what you want. Just know that I would prefer the security of having this connection to you while I am in your land.”

I dropped my hands from her shoulders and stepped backward. “I will never supersede your will simply because I am king.”

“Why not?”

“Because I—” I could not tell her I cared about her. It would be too awkward, too strange. She did not need that complication. But did that omission cross into the deception that I had sworn never to embrace?

I would have to think through that. I settled on, “Because I want you to feel safe. You cannot feel safe if you think I will overrule you anytime we disagree.” That was true.

I lifted a hand toward hers, and she set her fingers on mine. I wrapped my hands around hers, and bowed my head over them. “Forgive my reaction, Callista,” I whispered. “I am trying to control the fires that burn to life so quickly inside me.” I straightened up and returned her hand. “I will, of course, leave the bond if that is your preference.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. And then she turned and fled into her room.





CHAPTER 21: CALLISTA

What did a firehawk look like? It wasn't in the one bird book I'd brought with me, and my parents had never talked about them. Of course, Fotab was the one who would have been most interested in them, and he'd only lived in elven kingdoms for a few years.

I squinted into the early pre-dawn light at my window. Winter was passing into spring, and I could see several songbirds—some I knew and some I didn't—but no hawks. I had seen three different hawks during my time here, but none of them were in my book. Maybe—

A knock on the door to Aedan's room cut into my thoughts. I grabbed the blue dressing gown and wrapped it around my nightdress before opening the door.

Like always, Aedan looked equally prepared to hold court or fight a battle as he bowed. "Good morning."

I smiled. His new attempts at being polite, considerate, and kind were so deliberate and so obviously foreign to him. I would have thought royal elves would be schooled in polite persuasion, but perhaps ruling had always been more of a statement about power here. And if that was the case, his efforts to embrace a little humanity—or whatever the elves might call it—were even more attractive.

“Good morning,” I answered. “Typically, social visits happen after breakfast.”

“Yes,” he said, “but I’ll be a drekkan at that point, and I’d like to show you something first.” He glanced at my door. “Will you meet me in the hall?”

“Do I have time to get dressed?”

His eyes jumped to my window, and then scanned my clothes. “What you’re wearing seems perfectly decent, but if you’d prefer to change, I’ll wait. Time is short, though, so—”

I started to close the door. “I’ll hurry.”

In less than a minute, I’d dumped the dressing gown and night dress on the bed. I had two simple daygowns that were made from a soft, stretchy material with no buttons. I slipped into the peach-colored one, tied the gauzy laces behind my back, and headed to the door.

As soon as I stepped outside, Aedan’s lips twitched. “You’re coming bare foot?”

“Is that considered immodest here?”

His smile grew. “No, but not something the wealthy usually do.” I slipped my hand around his arm, and his smile broadened even more. “Typically, the nobles like to parade their footwear as signs of their rank and riches.”

I rolled my eyes. “No wonder everyone here is so difficult to get along with.”

He led me out of our hall and toward the courtyard. “What do you mean?”

We walked down a new corridor, one marked with a five-petaled forget-me-not. “Koan and Jolter have introduced me to a few people from Bridgetown, and they’ve all been really nice. I’ve enjoyed the time I’ve spent with them. They said that most of the people who live here, in the fortress, are higher nobles, and that’s why they’ve seemed more judgmental.”

“It is possible.”

“Seriously?” I walked faster to keep up with the king’s increasing pace. “Nobles using shoes as a symbol of status just confirms what they were saying.”

“Humans and fae do not use shoes to show their wealth?”

“Well—” A blush ran up the back of my neck. “I wouldn’t actually know. We didn’t interact with humans very often because my parents were sure they’d judge us for their marriage. For myself, I’d go barefoot anytime I didn’t need shoes. There is nothing more glorious than warm soil and sunshine on your toes at the same time.”

We’d cruised through several winding corridors and stopped in front of two double-wide doors. His green eyes lit up as he turned to me. “Perhaps we need another cultural experience.”

I grinned back. “Perhaps.”

“Have someone take you outside sometime when the sun is up, and I will find a place where you can show me this combination of soil and sunshine and bare feet.”

Something light and warm lifted in my chest. I liked spending time with Aedan, and hearing him invite me to do so was exciting in a way I’d never expected.

His hand clenched the door handle in front of us, and he almost bounced with enthusiasm. “I often come to the library in the mornings to try to find information on fae and how to remove my curse. It occurred to me this morning that you might enjoy it too... because you asked for history books before.”

These were library doors? I reached for them without even thinking. He put a hand up in front of me. “Does that mean you’d like to see the library?”

“Yes,” I huffed at him. “I thought we were in a hurry!”

He almost grinned, and a wild light filled his face like the feral smile from when he asked me to sing to his rose tree. “We are,” he said, “but the idea of a little suspense is suddenly very appealing to me.”

My jaw fell, and I blew out a huff of air. Was the Mighty Elf King teasing? I laughed and pushed my shoulder against his outstretched hand.

“Fine,” he growled, “but... close your eyes.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He slid his body between me and the door, blocking the entrance with a wall of muscle, a fine coat, and a sword on his belt. “Please?”

Please. Not any kind of insistence. How was I supposed to resist the great king’s *please*? I closed my eyes and lifted a blind hand.

His warm fingers wrapped around it, and then another warm hand landed between my shoulders. “May I?” he whispered.

I nodded, sure my voice would betray the flutters in my heart when he touched me. It didn’t make enough sense. I should hate him. I should hate him for what he did to my family and for the way he’d trapped me in Sirun. But I couldn’t hate anyone who was trying so hard to be better, especially when he already hated himself for what he’d done.

And that effort to improve was attractive.

My thoughts and emotions spun in a wild frenzy as he guided me into the library. It must have been huge because we walked at least twenty steps past the entrance before he let go of my hands and back. He radiated enough power that I felt his presence directly on my side as he whispered, “This is good. I... hope you like it.”

I opened my eyes, prepared to make some joke about his suspense, but the words caught in my throat. My jaw fell, and I didn’t even care. I had never seen anything so grand. The ceiling arced at least a hundred feet above me over a room so huge I couldn’t see the end in front of us. Dozens of walls twenty feet tall protruded from the edges of the room, each lined from top to bottom with shelves of books.

Above those walls, two balconies sprawled the edges of the cavernous rooms with more layers of books. A spiraling staircase connected the three levels, and hundreds of thumb-sized lights floated throughout the entire

space, casting a magical glow on thousands and thousands of books. My father would have wept at the sight.

I just stared. I spun a slow circle to try to take it all in, and then stared at the high domed ceiling again. Did those magic lights stay floating all the time, or had the king just put them there for me?

A hesitant voice came from behind my shoulder. “Do you... like it?”

I spun back to look at him. “Do I *like* it? I’ve never seen anything so—” I huffed a quick chuckle to try to hide the catch in my voice. “It’s... amazing. I don’t even have words. It... it’s just magical.”

He threw a glance at the domed ceiling, which was closer to the color of the early morning sky before sunrise than I’d first realized. “I added the magic light since it’s still dark. During the day, the ceiling lets in sunlight, and the entire space fills with the energy of the evidence of lifetimes of effort to create it.”

My head bobbed like an enthusiastic dog. “I can’t even imagine all the people who must have poured their hearts into making so many books... and the building too.”

With an anxious glance at the ceiling, he started walking away from me. “Come.” He paused and waved toward himself. “Please.”

My heart fluttered all over again at the way he’d corrected his request, and I followed him. He turned inside a huge alcove created by two giant shelves and gestured at the books inside. “The history of Hemlit. You’re welcome to any of them. And...”

His excited demeanor changed when he noticed the tears I was trying to keep back. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I brushed my eyes with my fingertips.

“Callista.” He closed the gap between us, blocking the exit to the alcove. “Please tell me. I will do everything I can to help.”

I blinked faster. “Truly. I just... I seem to cry every time I feel any emotion lately, and this is all so... grand.”

His green eyes flashed uncertainty. “What... emotion is so grand?”

“I... I’m not sure.” What emotion was it? I’d never had a hard time thinking of words to describe anything, but this... this was new. “I think it started with being overwhelmed by the books. I’ve always loved them, and my father loved them, so they made me think of him. But then you shared these—”

I gestured at the history books and sniffed back another set of tears. “Koan said you wouldn’t let me have history books because you thought I wanted to study them to find a way to destroy you. But now you’ve just offered me the whole collection.” My heart lurched at the words. That was what had brought the tears. This piece of evidence that he did not think I was trying to destroy him any more.

“Oh, Callista.” His voice dropped into a hoarse, emotional tone. “You would not need any history book to destroy me. You’ve had that power for weeks.”

I searched his green eyes for any sign of deception or jest, but there was only sincerity. He extended his hand. “Come, please.”

I set my hand in his and smiled. His fingers wrapped around mine, and heat enveloped my hand, flowed up my arm, into my heart, and made my head light. I squeezed his hand, trying to make sense of all the sensations, while he led me to an outer wall on the far side of the library.

He let go of my hand, pulling all his wonderful, heady heat away with him. He pointed at a palm-sized flame carved into the stone on the wall. “I’d like to share this with you also.”

I raised a brow. “The flame?”

His wild smile grew across his face and lit up his eyes. “Yes. I want to give a flame to my favorite firehawk... and watch her set the world ablaze.”

My heart! Those words! And that fierce grin! As my lips turned to match it, he raised a hand to the flame, covering it with his palm.

For a few seconds, the entire wall glowed. Then, the light gathered into a door-sized spot right in front of me, and faded into a stone-lined corridor.

Aedan kept his hand on the wall, but gestured inside with his other hand.

I stepped into the new hall. One step, then two—then I saw an entrance to another entire room. I backtracked until I stood next to Aedan again and studied what I thought had been an exterior stone wall. “It’s a secret room,” I breathed.

His smile broke free, and it took over his face, transforming him into an entirely different person. “Yes. It’s bigger inside. Come.” He tipped his head. “Please.” He waved inside again, and I scurried ahead of him.

I turned into the room. A wave of heat washed over me from behind, alerting me to his presence. This room was still big—at least as big as my parent’s kitchen, living room, and bedroom put together—but not nearly as overwhelming as the large library.

A dozen bookshelves lined this room, but most of the space in the middle was open. Two large, cushioned chairs sat at one end in front of a big desk. A few pieces of other furniture gave the room a cozy feel, despite it being more than half the size of the cabin I’d grown up in.

Aedan stepped up next to me. “This is my private library. The magic ties the entrance to my hand, so nobody else can come in... unless I allow it.”

He walked to a shelf behind the desk, and I followed. “These are the private chronicles written by the hands of kings—myself, my father, his father—for millennia. Histories that you will not find anywhere else. You...” His voice hitched before continuing in a lower tone. “You are welcome to read anything here.”

The enormity of such a gift took my breath away. But he wasn’t done.

He ran a hand tenderly along a shelf at his chest’s height, and stopped on a volume as thick as my palm. He pulled it out, and I gasped.

His surprisingly tender expression lifted from the book to me. “You can see magic on it?”

I nodded. “A lot.”

“Fae?” he asked.

I nodded again.

“I suspect it’s in the words.” He handed the book to me. “My father and grandmother both referenced their Secrets book in their personal histories, and how they wrote it in Fae so nobody would be able to read it. Apparently...”

He coughed to cover the catch in his throat. Something about this was deeply personal—maybe painful—and I had the impression he did not allow himself to feel it very often.

“Apparently,” he tried again, “it was a family tradition to teach the Crown Heir to read and speak Fae sometime after adulthood, but before they took the throne. I fear there are many things about my family that I will never know because my parents were killed prematurely.”

“Killed?” Fagan had said he’d lost his parents, but... At the same time? And if so, then all this time, he knew—more than anyone else could possibly know—how I’d felt. No wonder he wanted to punish himself so—

He nodded. “Acantha believes it was the work of fae. Many in my kingdom do.” The weight of the implication dripped off his words. *Many* in his kingdom hated me because a fae had killed his parents and cursed him.

“I don’t think it was my mother.” It might have been a selfish comment to make as he shared his own pain with me, but it was the first place my mind went. He’d said she came a year after his parents’ death, but she’d never left our cabin in my memory before she died.

“I don’t believe so either.” He ran his fingers along the cover. “I worried, when I met her, but I’ve had a long time to think about it. She came looking for the king, and she expected to find my father. She came openly, and was more brazen than you, but I do not think she knew about his death.”

He lifted his eyes to mine. All the energetic smiles from earlier had vanished, replaced with sorrow, pain, and maybe a little anger.

“Regardless, I do not blame you. And this is the only book I have written in Fae. I cannot read Fae, but I thought you might enjoy reading something

in your mother's tongue. And if you find anything terribly personal, I... I..."

I stepped closer and put a hand on his. I could not leave him alone when he opened himself up in such a vulnerable way to me. His skin positively burned—we were shorter on time than I'd realized. "I would tell you," I said. "Or, if you'd like, we could read it together."

He turned his hand over and gripped mine. "You... you would do that? After everything I've put you through?"

I squeezed his hand. His skin was almost too hot to touch. "After all the times you've saved my life? After all the things you've agreed to that I've asked for? After you've offered me... all of this?" I tightened my hold on his hand. I'd have to let go soon, but I wanted him to feel it through all the heat. "Yes. Yes, I would."

He tipped his forehead down until it touched mine, sealing my words like a scalding torch. "Thank you," he breathed.

"Let's come back tonight," I said. "It must be close to dawn."

He let go of my hand and stepped back, a fresh look of horror on his face as he set the book on the desk. "Are you burnt?"

"No." The heat cleared as soon as he'd moved away. "But I can tell you're hotter than normal."

He ran out the door and down the hall, then turned to see if I was behind him. Relief washed over his worried look, but he didn't take time to say anything. We ran through the library and down the same twisty corridors we'd taken to get there.

It was a good thing I'd spent my life running and climbing in the forest around our home—the king ran as fast as a bear. If he shifted in these corridors, would his scale-covered drekkan body break down the hall walls? Could he delay shifting long enough to get outside or did he just have to run fast enough to beat the sun's rising?

When we reached the indoor courtyard where all the tunnels met, we saw Forten and Mena heading toward the kitchen.

“Forten!” Aedan yelled.

The cook turned and dropped into a low bow. Before he finished straightening up, Aedan panted, “Take Callista to her room. Please.”

Forten glanced at me and said, “Of course.”

And Aedan bolted down the tunnel marked with a daisy.





CHAPTER 22: AEDAN

Daylight—the time I spent as a flying beast—passed more slowly when I was looking forward to an event in the evening. The moment I was capable of returning to the castle, I ran through its unnecessarily long corridors, ignoring the looks of the elves I passed. I didn't care if they saw me running for the first time in their lives. I wanted to catch Callista the moment she was available. I already hated myself for bearing a curse that required me to spend the day away from her, and I would not waste any more of the evening walking to our rooms.

When I reached our corridor, I slowed. She was in the hall talking with Mylo. I strolled up and bowed to her.

She practically bounced on her heels. "Aedan! I was hoping you would be here soon."

Mylo's expression grew an amused smile as he lifted his brows up and down once.

I ignored him and faced Callista. She wore a white, lacy dress with too many buttons to count, but they made the dress cleave and flow with her body in an ethereal, whimsical way. I offered her an arm. "Callista. I was afraid you might be engaged already."

She slipped her hand through mine as if we'd been walking together for years. "After an invitation like you left me this morning? I'm skipping

dinner for it.”

“You are not.” That was unthinkable. “Mylo—”

I paused. What if I didn’t *order* him to do what I wanted? People did things for Callista when she only asked. What if a king... asked?

I softened my voice. “Mylo, would you ask someone from the kitchens to bring us food in the library?”

His amused smile returned. “Are you sure about that? Maybe I should offer to chaperone you two instead?”

“Mylo,” I growled.

He waved a hand, as if to dismiss my protest, and laughed. “Of course, I’m happy to send food.” Then he turned to Callista. “You’ll tell me, though, if you need a chaperone, won’t you? I’m not sure I trust the king.”

She laughed and patted my arm with her free hand. “Thank you, I appreciate that.” Her voice lowered, and while she held my arm, she leaned toward him with a conspiratory tone. “He might not like me telling anyone this, but he’s the most honorable elf I’ve ever met.”

I couldn’t help muttering, “Considering that the other elves you’ve met are Koan and Jolter, that doesn’t say much.”

Mylo burst out laughing again and dipped his head as I nudged her away.

She kept up easily and chattered about birds she watched out the window, the weather changing, how she was concerned about the shorter nights and how that must mean that I’m a drekkan longer, and how she’d been thinking about my family’s book all day.

Was she trying to fill up the air with random thoughts? Or was this normal behavior for her when she was not nervous and unsure of how I would respond?

She stopped talking and slowed down when we entered the library. Her hand slid up to my bicep and tightened as she spun to face me. She set her free hand on my forearm.

Physically, I could lift her with one hand. Carrying her like a baby would take no more effort than lifting a fork. But as she held my arm with both her hands, I could not move a muscle. My body froze, caught somewhere between her open willingness to touch me and her blue eyes staring at mine. Did she hear my heart pound? Did she feel the fire that ran in my veins?

“We’re not in a hurry, right?” she asked, apparently oblivious to the effect her hands had on my arm.

“We have time for whatever you’d like.”

She smiled, and a hint of happiness leaked into the bond. She squeezed my arm with both hands. “Thank you. I’ll be so fast.”

Then she took those dangerous hands off my arm, ran to the spiral staircase, and set one hand on the banister. She started running, rushing up the steps with her white dress and flame-kissed hair flying out behind her and one hand trailing the top of the railing.

She was stunning. Beautiful in every way. Like a firehawk. I wanted to wrap her up and keep her forever... but one did not put a wild bird in a cage. She needed to be free—if for nothing else than to run up and down giant staircases in libraries.

She stopped at the top and surveyed the room from her new vantage point. I wanted to join her. Halfway up the staircase, though, I stopped. What if she did not want me up here with her? What if she wanted to be alone?

I had never questioned whether or not I should do something that I wanted to do, and that gave me even more pause. A king did whatever he wanted. But if what I wanted affected someone else—if it affected Callista, she should have a say in it. I looked up at her, and found she was not studying the massive library anymore—she was looking at me.

Her lips lifted in a beautiful, fresh smile that drew me closer. She was not upset at me joining her. When I reached the top, she threw her arms out to her sides and waved at the library’s expanse. “This is amazing. How long did it take to build?”

That was a good question. I rested a hand on the railing in front of us. “I’m not sure. It was a gift from the people of Sirun for King Toren and his new wife when they married, about 15,000 years ago. It gets reinforced with new layers of magic every decade.”

Both her hands patted the banister. “Amazing. Well—” She turned to me. “Shall we go read your book?”

I nodded and extended an elbow.

Instead of taking it, her eyes lit up and one corner of her mouth lifted. “Let’s race,” she breathed, and then ran down the stairs.

By the time I realized what was happening, she had a two-second lead on me. But I was an elf, and she had to lift her dress to avoid tripping on the hem.

I skipped the stairs three at a time and caught up to her before she reached halfway. I beat her by at least three seconds.

Winded, yet full of energy, and absolutely bursting with the playful challenge, I turned and caught her waist as she neared the landing. I spun her in a circle, twice, before I was flooded with her sweet happiness pouring through our bond. I spun her one more time, hoping to make it last a few seconds longer, and then set her down.

I didn’t want her to get sick.

She landed, panting, with a hand on my arm. “Thank you. I’ve wanted... to see that all day.”

I brushed a wild lock of hair away from her eyes. “You could have come with anyone else.”

“But I’ve been waiting for you.”

My heart rate doubled at that simple statement. I cleared another lock of hair away from her face. Something had changed in the air around us. I wasn’t sure when or how, but a current of energy filled the space between us, and I wanted nothing more than to close it. Would she let me touch her face?

In this moment—while her breath recovered from running, and she held my arm, and our eyes locked onto each other—I could believe she would welcome a gentle touch on her cheek, maybe a soft caress on her jaw...

But the library's large double doors swished open and shredded the moment.

I turned, torn between flaying whoever had decided now was a good time to read and cursing myself for opening the library to the public thirteen years ago. And then I saw our intruder... and cursed myself again.

One of the cleaning staff from the dining hall carried a tray with soup, bread, meat, cheese, and several other items I didn't care to inventory. The interruption was completely my fault. I reached for the tray. "I'll take that."

Her eyes widened as she let go of her burden and dropped into a curtsy. "Yes, Your Majesty." It didn't take a mistek bond to know she was anxious. Were servants always this way around me, and I just hadn't noticed?

"Thank you," I added, trying to remove the irritation I felt at being interrupted.

She dipped her head and kept her gaze on her shoes.

Callista swept up next to me. "We really appreciate you bringing this up here," she said, drawing the servant's eyes up from the floor. "I know it's not part of your normal work. I'm Callista." What a silly thing to say. Everyone knew who she was.

The servant, though, tipped her head in a polite greeting. "I'm Salor. It's nice to meet you." When Callista smiled at her again, Salor said, "I've been hoping to see you in the Dining Hall, but I'm not too surprised you haven't eaten there yet. The elves in there can be a little intimidating."

The servant had visibly relaxed as she spoke. Perhaps Callista's introduction was not so silly after all.

But I could not introduce myself every time I wanted to help anxious servants relax. That would come across as... quite ridiculous. Maybe I

should ask about something else she mentioned.

“Salor,” I started, “are you intimidated by the other elves in the Dining Hall?”

Her face blushed. “Only sometimes, Your Majesty. Most of them are fairly polite.”

“Most of them?”

She glanced at Callista, who stepped forward and took her hand. “His Majesty is not angry at you at all,” she said, throwing me a warning look with those intense blue eyes. “He tends to be very protective of his people, and I’m guessing he’s upset by the possibility that some of them might have mistreated you in his Dining Hall.”

Both ladies turned to me, Callista’s eyes still bright with warning while Salor’s were anxious and worried. I quieted the growl that wanted to escape and said only, “Callista is correct.”

“I...” Salor’s eyes darted from me to Callista, and then back to me. She dropped another curtsy. “I don’t want to get anyone in trouble, Your Majesty, but there are times when some people are a little harsh and demanding.” She turned back to Callista. “I’d rather not say anything more.”

“Of course.” Callista patted her hand again. “Nobody wants you to be uncomfortable—” She gave me another pointed look. “Right, Your Majesty?”

“Correct,” I agreed. “But.” I waited for Salor to look at me again. “If there is a situation I can help resolve, bring it to my attention. Or to Mylo’s. He will not ignore it either.”

She smiled—she wasn’t quite relaxed, but she was not as nervous as when I’d first taken the tray. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Salor, for bringing the food.”

Her nerves lessened a little more as she bobbed her head and muttered, “Of course.”

As she slipped out the door, Callista rolled her eyes and patted my arm again. “Do you make everyone so nervous? Or only cleaning girls?”

“I—” I had never considered the question before. I intimidated Koan and Jolter deliberately often enough, but... others? “I’m not sure.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “You probably do. How else would the *Cursed High King of Hemlit* keep the masses under control?”

The question did not sound like one she expected an answer to, so instead I asked one of my own. “Why is it that you do not find the *Honorable Monster* as terrifying as everyone else?”

“Oh, I did,” she said as I balanced the tray in one hand and pressed my other up to the stone flame. “It’s just that there were other things that terrified me more.”

I waved her through the hidden entrance. “Like what?”

“Like losing my brother.”

“So you were willing to face one terrifying thing to spare yourself from another?”

She smirked. “Pretty much.” As I set the tray on the large desk in my private room and gestured for her to take the chair, she added, “Unfortunately for you, I discovered you weren’t quite as terrifying as you wanted everyone to believe. You have a streak of goodness that embodies honor and justice, and it’s such a core part of you that even thirteen years of a curse haven’t been able to erase it. And—”

I set a bowl of pumpkin-scented soup in front of her. “Oh, this smells amazing.”

I picked up another chair and brought it to the small side of the table, adjacent to her. “Were you going to finish telling me why I am not so terrifying?”

A light pink lit up her cheeks. “Oh, no,” she said, filling a spoon with spiced broth. “I think it would be much better to eat now.”

When she finished eating, she slid the tray onto the empty half of the desk and rubbed her hands together. “Are you ready for this?”

I jumped up and brought the Secrets book to the table. I held it as I sat down and then ran my hand over the cover, letting the tingling magic that rose from it flick against my skin. How I had longed to know the things my father and grandmother believed were so important and secret that they were worth a second language. And not just any language—the language of our enemies.

The book had been bound at least a thousand years ago, but magic kept it in pristine condition. I handed it to Callista. “I have wanted to know what was in this for fourteen years, since I was first crowned king and discovered it in the King’s Private Library. But I will only hear it through your voice.”

She took the book... and my hand. “Thank you for sharing it with me.” She squeezed my hand before letting go and opening the cover.

The first page held drawings of flowers, vines, butterflies, and birds. I’d stared at it hundreds of times, but I didn’t want to rush Callista. She moved her hand slowly over each image. “Every image pulses magic a little differently,” she said. “I could study it for hours, but... I’ll come back to it.”

She turned the page to another one I had memorized. This was mostly blank with two words tidily drawn into the middle—two words that I could not read. “Our Story,” Callista said, smiling. “The magic that emanates from this page pulses with emotion. I can feel love and satisfaction and happiness.”

Strange. I’d imagined those same feelings as I’d studied the book, wishing my head would simply make sense of the words if I looked at them long enough.

She turned another page, landed on the first full page of text, set her finger under the words on the top line, and started reading.

“After surviving the ordeal of the last few years and finally finding a... degree of peace and happiness, Dustan suggested I write down our story. I

agreed with him, though (for reasons you'll understand soon enough) I am insisting we write it in the Mother Tongue. We've already agreed that our children will learn it as adults, and they are the people I am writing for. I want them to know the power in their blood and the strength they carry as part of our family.

"And so I write to you, my children, and my children's children. I know that if we can survive the things we have survived, you can triumph over anything you must deal with."

She looked up at me, her eyes so moist I didn't know how she was reading through them. "She loved you before you were even born. I wish I had something like this from Motab."

I reached out and wrapped a hand around hers, trying to swallow my emotions, but failing. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm so sorry."

She squeezed the top of my hand with her free hand and blinked. "I know. Let's keep going." Her fingers maneuvered out from under mine and underlined the words as she went again.

"Let the record show that I, Ember, Queen of Hemlit and wife of Dustan, was born a princess in a fae kingdom that does not bear recording."

Callista's eyes widened, and her jaw fell. She glanced up at me, then rushed to read more.

"As my children, you are half fae and half elf. The elves and fae have a long history that is more entwined than either likes to acknowledge, but you have access to more power than any in either realm because you have such a fresh inheritance from both worlds."

She stopped reading again, but I couldn't look at her. Everything faded out of focus, and the floor fell out from beneath me. I tried to grab the table to stabilize myself, but I couldn't. It was too smooth. How could I be part fae? The same people that I'd hated for so many years? How could I not know who I was—what I was—

But a hand gripped mine. Smaller than mine, not as hot, but real. Real and stable. I grabbed onto it with my other hand and felt another land on top of

it. I stared at them—our four hands—holding onto each other, and then I saw a person behind them. Callista. Her hands.

She came into focus, staring at me with bright, blue eyes. “Breathe, Aedan,” she whispered.

And I did.

“Keep breathing.”

I forced another scrap of air into my lungs. Over and over.

Each breath shook a little less. Each took a little less effort.

And the room started to come back into focus. The library. Desk. Floor. None of it had actually moved. It had all happened in my head. Because I had just learned everything I’d known about myself was wrong.

Callista squeezed my hands again. “Are you well?”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t think so.”

“What are you thinking?”

I blew out a long breath. What was I thinking? I started thinking out loud. “Everything I’ve ever known about myself is a lie. I’m a quarter fae. What does that even mean? And is that why my family—my aunts and uncle and cousins—have always had such powerful magic? And do any of them know?”

I looked at the book. I knew there were pages and pages in my father’s hand. “My father knew. Which means his siblings most likely knew. But their children? My cousins? Robin’s parents died when he was a child, and he grew up here. Since I didn’t know, he probably didn’t either. That only leaves Guyan. His parents died before mine, but after Robin’s. Acantha finished raising him, so I have no idea if she told him before the curse stranded him outside of Sirun.”

I raised my eyes from our hands to Callista’s face. “Why did all our parents die so early? Mine went from an unknown poisoning, Robin’s technically killed each other, and Guyan’s were in a strange accident.”

My voice trembled. “Callista—what if that wasn’t what really happened? What if someone found out and has been killing my family?” My mind jumped to Acantha—was she safe? What if she was next on a murderer’s list?

But... why hadn’t she already been killed? The others all died years ago. What if...

Could she have helped with a conspiracy?

“Callista. What if it was Acantha?”

“Your aunt?”

I nodded slowly. “All her siblings and their spouses died, but she’s been fine. She blamed the fae for my parents’ death and Guyan’s, but she had to know that we were all part fae. Blaming the fae doesn’t make any sense, unless it was to distract from something.” And she’d been playing the role of a doting aunt and helpful advisor to me for over a decade. Was she just waiting for the right opportunity to strike? That scene in the rose cave made so much more sense if she’d been playing me—

“Aedan?” Callista looked at me hesitantly. “I don’t know what to think about your aunt, but I don’t think you should do anything... rash.”

My heart started to pound. I would not give Acantha a chance to kill me if she had already killed my parents. And Robin’s and Guyan’s.

“Aedan?”

Even Fagan had warned me about Acantha’s dangerous side. I needed to put up walls around every thought or emotion that would make me sympathetic to my aunt.

“Aedan.” Callista’s voice intensified. I focused on her. “I don’t like your aunt, so please don’t mistake what I’m about to say.” I nodded, and she continued. “You’ve just found out something so big and so huge that I can’t even imagine what it would feel like. Maybe like part of you died. Maybe you’re mourning a loss and also trying to figure out the part of you that you just discovered. Maybe it feels like I felt when you told me what happened to Motab.”

Her voice cracked, and my walls shattered. This revelation was world-shattering, but it could not be worse than what she'd been through.

And she'd left me alive.

She swallowed and kept going. "I just don't want you to jump to conclusions about your aunt and do something that you'll regret later on. Maybe just knowing the possibility of her duplicity will help you. Maybe your father recorded something about her that will help you know what to do when we read it. But I would hate to see you have to deal with the regret of a decision that you can't undo if you change your mind later."

Losing my identity. Gaining a new one. Considering Acantha as a traitor. Holding Callista's hands. It was all so very much.

I blew a deep breath and laid my forehead on our hands. I took a few more breaths—slow, very, very slow breaths. One of Callista's hands slipped away from the pile and landed on the side of my head. Her thumb brushed over my scalp, slowly, over and over, for at least a minute.

Her touch was soft and careful, but it wiped away some of the tension that had overwhelmed me. Being part fae shouldn't change anything essential about me. I was still the Cursed King of Hemlit, drekkan by day and elf—and fae—by night, more powerful than any other elf in the kingdom. More powerful, according to my grandmother, than any fae as well.

Callista did not find my new history repulsive. She sat here and stroked my head and held my hand. I was still the embodiment of royal power, protection, honor, and—hopefully—kindness. I straightened up and looked at her.

"Thank you," I finally said. "Thank you for being here." The book summoned my attention, and I glanced at it, still in shock over the secrets it contained. "You are right. I will be cautious, but I will not attack Acantha until I know more. At least until we finish reading my father's words."

"Do you want to read any more tonight?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think I can handle any more tonight. But tomorrow morning, if you wake before dawn?"

She tightened her fingers around my hand one more time. “Of course. I’d love that.”



After I’d delivered Callista safely to her room and secured her door with magic, I could not rest. I had too many things on my mind.

I started to review everything Acantha had done since my parents died, but the confines of my room felt claustrophobic. I returned to the corridor and paced its length. When I reached the end, I saw Koan and Jolter approaching.

“What are you two up to at this hour?” I asked.

They looked at each other, Jolter shrugged, and then they turned back to me. Like usual, Koan spoke for them both. “We usually stop by Callista’s door at some point and make sure it either has a guard or a magic seal. We know at least three elves who would be happy to see her dead, and we don’t want to make it easy by forgetting her at night.”

I nodded slowly. “I appreciate that,” I said. “It is an honorable action.”

Koan elbowed Jolter. “Did you hear that? I think the king just complimented us.”

Jolter elbowed him back, but spoke to me. “Is there something you’re looking for, Your Majesty?”

I wasn’t about to tell them the greatest secret of my life, but perhaps they could help me with another mystery. “I have secured Callista’s door for tonight,” I told them. They didn’t need to worry. “If anyone tries to enter without permission, their experience will be most unpleasant.”

A mischievous grin scrawled across Koan’s face. “Your seals are potent enough for us to feel from ten feet away. I’d love to see someone get hit with it who tries to break in.”

I returned his grin. “It would be satisfying.”

Koan elbowed Jolter again. “Did you hear that? The king was almost friendly to me.”

I resisted rolling my eyes. “There is another topic I would like your insight on.”

Both their eyes widened. Koan recovered the fastest. “We’d love to help.”

I nodded. “I have heard things that have made me curious about the safety of the elves who work in the Dining Hall. Would you say that is something I should be concerned about?”

They gave each other another look, and Jolter shrugged again. Did these two communicate telepathically? Or were they just around each other enough that they could read each other’s expressions?

“If it’s a problem, it’s late at night,” Koan said. “Now might be a good time to take a look, if you’re curious.”

I raised a brow. “Are you part of the problem?”

Koan threw a hand to his chest in feigned shock. “Us? Never.” He relaxed his arm. “I mean, we flirt with everyone a bit—well, not Jolter anymore, but that’s not the point. We’re nice to everyone. If they’re uncomfortable, we stop. Some of the others are—well, let’s just go see.”

The Dining Hall was much louder and more raucous than I would have expected to see in the middle of the night. I slipped inside and stood in shadows against the wall. Three groups of elves laughed and shouted at each other, clearly under the influence of too many spirits. Was it like this every night?

Koan slid closer to me and hid our voices with silencing magic. “Looks like we have three groups tonight. Typically, anyone out late will cluster around one of the highest ranked nobles.”

“Are you usually part of that number?” I asked.

“We’re here about a third of the time, but people come to us. We don’t go to them.” I could hear his smile as he said, “Our table is always the most

fun. We'll have our wine, but people like us because we're fun even without the drinks."

"Yes, your sober fun has been a thorn in my side for years," I muttered.

He laughed. "Happy to help. At least we make our own choices." He gestured at the table in the middle of the room. "Broomden overindulges almost every night. I'm not even sure he can remember much the next day, but the fools flock to him because he has money to buy their drinks. And they hope the association will bring them prestige."

Koan's analysis of the social structure amongst nobles was more objective than I'd expected. He pointed to the other two groups. "Meldrin and Shancy are harmless. Shancy only pretends to get drunk—she never gives up control of her faculties. If Meldrin stays out this late, he'll be drunk, but he's a gentle soul, whether or not he's sober."

As Koan finished speaking, Broomden slammed an empty glass onto the table so hard it shattered. "Servant!" he shouted.

Salor scurried over to his table. "Yes, My Lord?" He grabbed her hand and pressed it against the glass on the table. "I asked for a drink ten minutes ago. Now my cup is broken."

Koan stepped out of the shadows, toward the table. I grabbed the back of his tunic and pulled him back. "Your Majesty," he hissed, "someone needs to stop Broomden. He *will* hurt her."

I pressed Koan behind me.

Broomden still had Salor's arm pinned to the table. "When I ask for a drink, I expect it to come *fast* or else I will—"

I unfurled my power with all the abandon of a monster. If I had fae blood in my veins, I was going to use it well. Smoke and flames rose off my body while heat spread through the room. Everyone between Broomden and myself scattered. Broomden let go of Salor and turned to look at me.

"You will ask her nicely again," I growled with the rumbling tone of the drekkan. "And again, as many times as it takes. You will never threaten someone you are in a position to protect." I raised my voice on magic so it

filled the hall. “It appears I will be setting a guard in the hall to keep order. If I hear of anyone behaving so dishonorably again—” I gave Broomden a pointed look. “You will lose your rank and status.”

A few gasps rolled through the hall.

I raised my voice again and let the flames surrounding my body grow larger. “Does anyone have any questions?”

When silence answered me, I glanced at Salor. “Anyone on duty to clean tonight is dismissed.” I turned to Broomden and made my voice thunderous. “Broomden and those at his table will clean the hall tonight. Meldrin and Shancy will make sure it is done. Everyone else will go home.”

Elves scattered. In less than a minute, the hall was empty, except for Broomden, his five little bootlickers, Meldrin, and Shancy. I toned the flames down just enough that they could see my face more easily. “As nobles in Hemlit, I expect you to protect the people around you. If you must spend your nights in my Dining Hall, make sure it is a safe place for everyone... or your new status will be worse than the servants who clean up your messes now.”

I blew a hot wave of air over Broomden and marched out the door.





CHAPTER 23: CALLISTA

I flipped through the yellow birds pages of the book I'd brought back from the library last week. As late spring settled on Sirun, the new species out my window changed every day. But this one—

This was the first to land on my window and whistle at me. And I had no idea what it was. I'd opened the glass hours ago because the weather was so warm—I hadn't expected any of the birds to come this close.

I grabbed another book, trying to find one that matched the bright yellow bird with red dots along the edges of its wing. It looked like some kind of parrot—bigger than the songbirds, but not nearly as big as a hawk.

A light tap sounded on my door.

"Come in!" I called, continuing my search through the book. I only knew two elves who would knock that softly, and one of them lived in Bridgetown. It had been a couple months since I'd met Molanna, and Jolter hadn't convinced me to cross the bridge to visit her yet.

But Salor lived here in the fortress and had come by to see me at least twice a week since we'd met. The only other possibility was Mylo's wife, Corva, but she only came with Mylo. As expected, Salor opened the door... and froze.

"Callista! How did you get a callida to come to you?"

“A... callida?”

She stepped closer to me and whispered. “Your golden bird.”

I wrinkled my brows. “Did you just name it after me?”

She laughed. “No, though it might be appropriate. I think it means something like *clever*.”

I sighed dramatically. “Well, not after me, then. Callista means *Beauty* in a language my parents knew.” I wasn’t going to tell her it was the Mother Tongue, but she knew my father was a scholar and my mother enjoyed learning.

She clapped her hands silently. “That’s perfect for you.” Then she pointed at the bird. “Callidas are famous for being incredibly smart and gathering sparkly things for their nests. Some people think they can even understand language and pick out their favorite elves to follow around.”

I had lots of hair pins with glittery gems. At first I’d worried for Mylo when he’d brought me a dressmaker and so many accessories. Then, he told me the king had paid for it, and... I didn’t worry for him anymore.

Nor did I worry about giving away some of the pins.

I set three in my hand and started talking to the bird. “Hey there, I hear you like pretty things.” I stepped closer to it. “Can I call you Gaudi? It means something like ‘bringing joy,’ because it made me so happy to see you here.” I walked slowly toward it with the pins on my extended hand. “You can have these, if you’d like them. My friend tells me you might.”

I stopped right in front of the bird. She rubbed her head against the side of my palm, chirped twice, gripped the pins with one of her clawed feet, and then flew away.

Salor rushed up to me, and we watched Gaudi disappear into the forest. “Wow,” she breathed. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“Do you think she’ll come back?” I asked.

“I have no idea. I’d leave the window open, just in case.”

“I don’t think I’ll close it until it snows. Even then... I wonder if the king can enchant it to keep out the cold and let birds in.”

Salor shook her head. “I can’t imagine asking the High King to do anything.”

I chuckled. “I don’t really see him as a formal High King, and he’s usually happy to help.” I’d seen too much of the depths of his pain to be so formal. And sometimes, when we sat close to each other reading in the mornings, the air would charge, and I was sure that his heart pulled on mine. In those moments, it took all the strength I had not to throw myself into his arms, soak in his crazy heat and delicious cedar scents, and confess that I found him wildly attractive.

But, as close as Salor and I had grown over the last few weeks, I would not admit any of that to her. Or to anyone else. They were thoughts I had to keep firmly in my own head. “So what brings you up here this afternoon?” I asked.

Her eyes widened. They did that a lot—at first I thought she was always worried, but then I decided she was just surprised easily. “I nearly forgot! Forten said to tell you they have another set of lemons, and he wanted to invite you into the kitchen today or tomorrow to make more lemonade.”

Forten was like a giant bear. He looked terrifying, but he was even softer than the king. “Oh, that sounds wonderful. Tell him thank you. I’d love to come by—I’ll ask the king if he wants to come too before I pick a day.”

She shook her head again. “I’ll let him know. I need to get back down there.” She paused halfway to the door. “Do you know, it’s been two months, and Broomden still sends everyone home four hours after dinner? He even acts like a *noble* noble now. I never thought I’d see the day.”

I smiled. “I’m glad.”

I was still grinning in the middle of my room minutes after she left—picturing Aedan using all his flaming power and ruthless reputation to terrify Broomden while secretly letting me see the most vulnerable emotions possible—when Mylo pounded on my door and opened it himself half a second later.

“Callista—” He spoke quickly, but made eye-contact and carried a tone of urgency. “I need to go help with an emergency. I’ll seal your door, so do not open it if anyone knocks. Anyone who needs you can wait until I get back. I do not have time to find someone else to stay with you.”

“I’ll stay.” Flashes of the last time he wanted me to stay in my room teased my memories as he raised a brow. “I promise,” I added.

“Do it for my sake, if you can’t manage it for yours,” he added. “The king will kill me if anything happens to you.” That was a sweet sentiment, but I nodded my agreement. He turned, and I just caught a glimpse of another soldier behind him before he closed my door and set it glowing with a magic seal.

I doubted the elves could see it glowing, but my magic senses had no trouble picking up the seal.

The last time Mylo had been whisked away from me, a horde of karkins had frightened the horses outside. What might have drawn him away so urgently today?

Aedan said he only trusted three elves to guard my door, partly because of their personal motives and partly because of their magical strength, so Mylo, Jolter, and Koan rotated their days in my hall or escorting me around the fortress to different activities. Were Koan and Jolter involved in this crisis? Or were they completely unaware of it? Maybe they’d gone to Bridgetown?

I was still standing in the middle of the room, wondering about what the captain’s newest crisis might be, when a dark purple magic flooded the room. Heat flashed through the entire space like a blast of hot air from an oven door opening, and the walls of my room lit on fire.

My jaw fell slowly as I realized what was happening. There was no crisis for Mylo. Someone had distracted him so they could burn my room down.

If I had been standing near any of the walls, or on my bed, I’d already be dead. I tried to press my rising panic down with logic. As it was, a ring of fire completely surrounded me. Flames blocked Aedan’s door and the hall door, and smoky heat quickly filled my room.

If I didn't get out of my room, I would die. And I wouldn't have any help. Whoever had done this had arranged for me to be alone in this inferno.

The entryway to my washroom only had a streak of fire across the ground—no door separated the space from my bedroom, so I rushed through the entrance and tried to leap over the flames along the ground. Some of them jumped to my skirt. I ignored them and climbed into the washbasin.

I turned on all the valves that controlled water, and stepped under the fountain meant to fill the large basin. The water drenched my clothes and doused the flames. I grabbed a towel, soaked it, and wrapped it around my body. Then I grabbed another, soaked it too, and wrapped it around my head.

I didn't have time for anything else. I had to get out of the washroom before the flames at the entrance grew too high for me to jump over.

I couldn't jump as well with my wet towels. The fire had grown, but my clothes were wet enough that I was able to leave the washroom and get back in my main bedroom without any trouble. Getting out of my bedroom, though...

That would be something else.

I stared at the door, and my vision blurred as panic clawed at me. Flames more than five feet deep blocked my escape. My towels no longer dripped—how could they possibly protect me from a fire this big?

And not just a fire. It was clearly a magic fire, which meant it burned hotter and would be harder to put out. Even Aedan, as a drekkan, had been burnt by the karkins' magic fire. How was a non-magical half fae, half human supposed to run through it?

I clenched my teeth. Because the only other option was to stay here until the smoke and flames choked me to death. And I was not ready to die today.

I wadded up a few layers of towel in my hand to use as a mitten, wrapped the other one around my face better, and then ran straight into the flames.

The heat made me want to turn around and run straight back out, but I could not. Only one direction led to surviving this day. Every other direction—every other choice—meant death.

I grabbed the door handle and twisted it while my eyes stung and the smoke closed off my throat. I held my breath and ignored the pain in my skin as I flung the door open and burst into the hall.

A rush of heat followed me out of the room, pressing me to run into the hall faster. I patted out the flames that licked at my skirts with the towels, and then threw them off my body. They were hot and dry, and parts of them had burnt holes already. But what I thought would be a safe hallway had turned into another death trap.

Apparently, magic fire could burn in a stone corridor.

The hall that would normally lead down the tower and into the main part of the castle was completely blocked by flames... and those flames moved toward me.

I ran away from them, terror mounting in my chest. Only one door remained at the end of this hall—one door that opened to a tiny balcony that dropped hundreds of feet to the ground below. And someone was pushing the fire closer to me.

But running away from the fire was my only option. Maybe someone would be outside under the balcony with some kind of magic that could help me. Maybe someone would see the fire and find someone who could put it out.

I coughed as I ran. Smoke had settled in my throat and made normal breathing much more work. The fire rushed behind me, knowing that I had nowhere to go.

Maybe the fire didn't know, but somebody was controlling it. And lots of people had to know there was no safe exit at the top of this tower.

When I reached the door, my only options were to stay in the hall and die from the fire or open the door and hope for something else to present itself.

I threw the door open... but did not step onto the little balcony. I scanned the ground for any signs of someone who might help me. I did not see anyone.

I did see a great drekkan flying out of the forest on the other side of the lake at a breakneck speed—so fast that even I could tell it wasn't safe. A mighty roar filled the sky—even louder than the fires behind me—and a stream of flames left the drekkan's mouth.

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest. "Aedan," I whispered, and tears filled my eyes. I didn't even try to hold them back this time. Aedan was not going to let me die now.

The flames reached me before he did, so I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the balcony, gripping the stony outcropping attached to the castle.

Seconds later, he flew up in front of me. "Callista," his deep, gravelly voice drawled. "You must jump to me. I cannot fly any closer to the castle. My wings will hit the tower."

My eyes fell to the ground hundreds of feet below us, and the landscape started to swim. I closed my eyes. "I can't jump. I can't even stand up."

"Callista." His voice had grown raw, sounding just as desperate as mine. "Do you trust me?"

My lower jaw quivered. I stayed on my hands and knees with my eyes closed, but... his question.

Did I trust him?

Hadn't he taken burns for me when he could have left me to the karkins? Hadn't he stepped in front of his aunt's magic for me? But even more than that, during all the weeks we'd spent together reading his grandmother's story, he had been so careful, so considerate...

A wave of heat behind me made up my mind. I could not stay here. I opened my eyes and focused on his bright green irises. Black tinged the edges of my vision, but I pushed it back, refusing to acknowledge a darkness that wanted to consume me.

Only him. I would only allow him to enter my vision. Only his eyes. “I’m so scared,” I whispered, choking on the words.

He flapped his great, black wings so he hovered vertically, his massive chest and clawed arms facing me. “Jump as far as you can.” He held my gaze, not even blinking. All I needed to do was jump into his arms.

It wasn’t as romantic as I’d pictured us in the library, but I trusted his drekkan form as much as his elf.

I stared at his eyes, refusing to even glance away in case that glance became a world-tipping, soul-crushing fear of heights.

I stood, clenched my fists, and ran off the end of the tiny stone balcony. I leaped into the air, as if I could fly as easily as a drekkan. As soon as the ground disappeared under me, my hands flew to my face, covering my eyes.

And then I crashed into a hot, dry body. It wasn’t hot like flames. It was a welcoming bed that had been warmed in advance for me by my mother’s magic. It was the sun at the height of a summer day reminding me that I was still alive by heating my skin.

Still alive. Warm, scale-covered arms wrapped around me, cocooning me against a reptile’s chest. I had survived, and Aedan would take care of me now.

Relief swept the last of my strength away. I closed my eyes, succumbing to the darkness that had been pressing into my vision. Safety enveloped me. I could let go now.





CHAPTER 24: AEDAN

The pounding terror that threatened to eat my internal organs finally subsided when I caught Callista and cradled her against my chest. I had known pain, misery, and guilt. I had known trauma and loss. But never had I known fear until her stark panic, followed by pain, had surged through our bond.

She slipped into unconsciousness, and I shifted her body so I could fly more easily. My drekkan vision had seen her charred and tattered dress before she ever jumped—

“Oh, Callista,” I muttered. “You jumped.” *You looked at one terrifying thing—death by flame—and leaped into another.* I knew how scared she had been—I had felt it. I tightened my hold on her. The amount of trust she gave me melted my heart.

She had risked certain death if I’d failed her. The more that thought sank into my mind, the more I determined to never fail her. Not when her life was on the line, but also not in the little things. I wanted to spare her from loneliness and sorrow and—

Her arm twitched, and I shifted it so she couldn’t thrash. I needed to let her rest somewhere safe, but I also wanted to rage back to the castle and find out why she had been pushed out of the tower by fire.

I laid her on a knoll covered with soft, spring grass and loose soil that I dried and warmed with magic. Ash covered her face and arms, but I knew she had burns under the black.

As I let her roll onto the ground, her leg thrashed and her eyes opened with an anxious look. I draped a clawed finger over her arm, wishing for my real hands more than I ever had before. "Callista. You are safe."

"Aedan?" She wrapped her arm around my finger and murmured, "Don't leave me."

"Of course not." I tried to whisper, but the cursed drekkan's voice didn't have a soft level. "Can I heal your burns?"

"Please," she whispered as she slipped back into sleep.

I threaded my magic into her arm and used it to encourage her body to grow new skin and knit it into the old. I cleared the ashes out of her lungs and throat, and I breathed easier as fresh air flowed unimpeded through her body. I wasn't sure if I could give her strength through the mistek bond, but I tried.

She looked so calm and relaxed that I could not bring myself to pull my finger out from under her arm. Instead, I sat next to her, crouched so she could wrap her arm around my finger.

An hour passed. Then two. I did not want to wake her, but I needed to return to the castle soon. A callida flew up to us and started chirping a warbly song.

"Your kind usually avoids me," I rumbled at it.

The bright yellow thing stopped singing long enough to make a chortly laugh, and Callista stirred.

She woke up slowly, stretching and blinking until her eyes focused on my face. Her brows lifted. "Did you know you're big enough to eat me?"

I rolled my eyes, glad that she was well enough to make such a light-hearted comment. "A wild drekkan would not think twice about making you dinner, but I've retained my elven sensitivities despite this form."

She hugged my finger and sat up. I retrieved my hand, but I missed her touch. It had been a light thing, but a very real sign of her trust and comfort with me, even while I was a monster. Would she touch me again? Or was it only the result of her terrified state earlier?

She bent her knees and attempted to dust ashes and char off her dress. Her toes poked out of the damaged layers of fabric, and then they wiggled into the loose dirt. She lifted them up enough so the late-afternoon sunshine landed on them. A wide grin spread across her face as she hugged her knees. “Are we here for a *cultural experience*?”

I dug a man-sized hole into the ground with my toes and then lifted the soil-covered appendages into the sunshine. They just felt dirty. “Perhaps I would appreciate it more if I had elf toes.”

Callista pressed her chin into her knees. “What exactly did my mother curse you with?”

I shifted my weight into a more comfortable position. “That is an unexpected question.”

“I’ve just realized I never asked you. All this time you’ve wanted to learn about fae and curses, but maybe she gave you the answer.” She shrugged. “I never actually saw my mother curse anyone, so I’m doubly curious.”

I blew out an uncomfortable breath. “I confess that the events of the day have distorted my memories. Robin, my cousin, was with me, though, and he said that she turned the power of the lies we told her around on us to make us suffer our own magic. I was to feel the effects of my own monsters and the protective barrier that I’d wanted to reinforce would become impenetrable.”

Callista tipped her head. “That’s less of a curse and more of a reversal of magic... at least the part about suffering your own monsters.”

She shifted so her elbows rested on her knees and her head landed in her hands. “She didn’t say anything about how long it would last? With wording like that, I’d expect it to go away as you became less monstrous.”

I snorted. “Less monstrous? Whatever is that supposed to mean?”

She stood up and set a hand on my folded wing. “You might not realize this, but you were far more horrible when we first met than you are now. I’ve... I’ve never felt safer with anyone.”

Her hands shifted to her hips. “Did she *tell* you when it would end? You said you deceived her. Was there a condition or two that you must meet? Maybe related to lying?”

I looked away from her as her mother’s words played in my mind. *You will suffer the effects of your own monsters until you beg for the kindness you refused me and feel the pain of love you do not deserve.* I could not say the words out loud. I had already begged Callista for the kindness of a punishment I deserved, and she had refused me. I felt the pains of loving her when she could never want me—someone she had already labeled *monstrous*.

And I refused to make her feel any responsibility for finding a way to release me from the conditions her mother had made. “She listed conditions, but they are impossible. That is why I’ve scoured the library for more information. Other options.” I turned back to look at her. “But reading my family’s book is more important to me than breaking the curse, and I am grateful for every moment you spend with me doing that.”

She patted my wing again. “See that, right there? Those words would never have come from the drekkan’s mouth I first met.”

I shook my head. “The sun is close to the horizon. We need to get back to the castle before I shift out here and we get stuck in the forest for the night.”

She looked over her shoulder, as if she could see the castle, but it was the wrong direction. I lifted a wing and pointed. “It’s that way.”

Her lower lip slipped under her teeth before tilting into tiny smile. I’d never seen her bite her lip before. “Would you believe that I’d rather get stuck out here in the forest with you than go back to the castle and face... whoever tried to kill me?”

My brows lowered into a scowl, and I couldn’t stop them if I wanted to. “Who did it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Mylo got called away, and then the edges of my entire room went up in flames.”

“What happened after that?”

She choked her way through a quick summary and looked at me with a hopeful expression that I didn’t know what to do with—but I didn’t want to make it go away. “Perhaps you’re right,” I grumbled in the drekkan’s lowest tones. “We can stay in the forest tonight.”

She burst out laughing and slapped my wing playfully. “We cannot. But I love hearing you say that.”

A feral smile took over my face. It probably looked terrifying as it displayed my teeth and curled my lips, but it was a real, genuine smile. “I will say anything you like if it makes you that happy.”

Her smile shrank, but it didn’t disappear. “We need to go back. There will be some people worried, especially if nobody saw us fly away.” Now her smile vanished. “And someone will be wondering if they succeeded.”

“Someone who wants to die.”

She turned to look at me, her bright blue eyes wide. “If we figure out who it is, you don’t really plan to kill them, right?”

“I most certainly do. They intended death. They will feel death.”

“But... then they won’t learn anything.”

That wild smile scrawled across my face again. “This is becoming a very familiar conversation.”

She folded her arms. “Then you should know the answer already.”

I folded my own arms. Just because I was a giant lizard didn’t mean I was wrong. “I will not leave a threat like this alive. They will try again. And I will not risk your life because you do not like violence. You do not need to watch.”

She bit her lip again. I made a good argument. Finally she sighed. “Then promise me you won’t kill them without overwhelming certainty that they

are the right person. No hints or hunches or small amounts of evidence. You cannot have any doubt at all that you have the one responsible.”

“I will agree to that.” I wanted to eliminate a threat, not kill an innocent elf. “Now, can I carry you home?” I lifted a claw to pick her up.

A wry smile made her eyes twinkle. “You don’t have to use your claw. A dragon could be described as a giant, flying horse.”

I growled. “My dignity would never recover.”





CHAPTER 25: CALLISTA

Aedan and I stood in the middle of my ash-blackened room. I wanted to scan for anything that had escaped the fire. He...

I did not know what he was doing.

Instead of finding anything familiar, horrible memories started to lunge from every corner. The bed that had combusted at the same time as the walls. The walls that had turned into a death trap. The entrance to the washroom I'd had to leap over. The smoke that drowned me...

Suddenly, the smoke and the flames were all I could see, all I could feel. The heat and suffocation blocked my throat and attacked my skin again. Part of me whispered it was a memory, but it felt so real.

But then—

A warm hand on mine interrupted the attack. Another hand touched my shoulder and Aedan's voice came from right in front of me. "Firehawk," he whispered, "you are stronger than whatever your mind is telling you. Open your eyes. You've already beat this."

When had I closed my eyes? I opened them, and saw Aedan bent in front of me, his bright green eyes level with mine and etched with concern. "Are you with me?"

I nodded. The fire had been hours ago.

Aedan held my eyes. “There are only a few people capable of the targeted destruction that was unleashed here. When I figure out who it was, there will be no mercy.”

Pounding boots thundered in the hall. Aedan slowly straightened up and we turned to see Mylo run into the room with far less decorum than normal.

“Aedan! Callista!” He caught his breath and settled into a stiffer pose, but his face still showed enormous relief. “You’re alive. I was so sure that—”

Aedan interrupted. “What happened here?” As he spoke, his fingertips brushed against the back of my hand. I flipped my hand around and gripped his, grateful he’d put it close enough for me to reach easily.

Mylo’s gaze flicked to our hands, then back up the Aedan. “Garven told me there was a crack in the fortress’s water reservoir and that a rupture was imminent. He said another messenger had already gone to get Corva, so I rushed to the reservoir to make sure the water stayed contained.”

“They took you to the opposite side of the fortress,” Aedan summarized.

Mylo nodded. “It turned out there was no crack. Garven had been misinformed by Porter who had been misinformed by someone else.” He waved his hand. “There was a chain of at least eight people, and the first was wearing a glamor.”

Aedan’s brows wrinkled. “How did you figure that out?”

Mylo rolled his eyes. “Because he looked like me.”

“What?”

Mylo ran a hand through his hair. Very uncharacteristic. “The last person I interviewed was confused by my questions and finally explained that I’d told him to get help because the reservoir was about to burst.” He shook his head. “I was in this hall the entire time, until Garven came to get me.”

He turned to me. “When I realized what had happened... I’ve been sick it about all afternoon. I thought maybe you survived in the washroom or

Aedan's room, but the washroom had burned and Aedan's door had melded with the wall—you could not have gotten into it if you'd tried. So then..."

He glanced away from both of us. "I searched outside under the balcony. When I couldn't find you, I feared that..."

I felt bad for this sweet soldier who had spent a third of his days for months guarding my door or escorting me around the castle. "Mylo."

He turned back to me.

Tightening my fingers around Aedan's, I looked at the captain. "Mylo, I don't blame you. You couldn't have known."

He bowed his head, and I squeezed Aedan's hand. "I do not hold you responsible either," the king said. "It was a well-calculated attack, and we will need to be just as precise as we hunt the perpetrator."

Mylo bowed. "I've been lurking in the Dining Hall to see if I overheard anything useful, but when I realized the hour, I came up here to try to catch you before you discovered what I thought was... a horrible tragedy. I... What would you like me to do now?"

Aedan kept his fingers firmly wrapped around my hand, but his thumb traced the length of mine while he spoke slowly. "Listening for any loose tongues is a good idea, but do not spend the night there. Spend it with your wife. I think... I take you away from her too often."

Mylo's jaw fell, but he whipped it back into position and dipped his head. It was a lot more bowing than he normally did, but he probably wasn't sure what else to do with such a generous king.

"I... Your Majesty, are you well?"

"No." Aedan growled almost as low as his drekkan. "I will not be *well* until I remove this threat. But that is not a reason for you to be unwell also. I will guard Callista until we figure out who did this." His tone softened. "Enjoy some time with Corva, as much as you can arrange. You've spent much more time here than normal lately."

The king's thoughtful instructions to Mylo mixed with the slow motion of his thumb on my hand and warmed my heart. These moments, where he

did something for someone else that was not mandated by his honor or duty, made him seem vulnerable—like he was risking a new behavior. It was a chance for someone to consider him weak, to think that he cared, but he did it anyway. And that effort made me want to throw my arms around his neck and give him a hug so tight he'd actually feel it through his thick skin.

And maybe I should be a little less judgmental of his thick skin. He'd lost his parents close to when I lost mine. I took care of my brother; he'd taken care of his kingdom. And then he'd been cursed... but was it really so hard to imagine him worrying so much that he'd tried to protect himself from my mother?

It wasn't.

At least, not anymore.

After Mylo left, Aedan led me out of my room, into the hall, and into his room.

We stopped just inside the door.

His room was monstrous—big enough for his drekkan to sprawl across the empty floor space like a dragon might in a throne room. On the far left, a bed big enough for four adults filled the center of the wall. That entire side of the room looked like its own room—the bed, a large chair, a long couch, a table, wardrobe, and a few other pieces of furniture were all arranged in such an ordered and structured format that I was sure it had been done by my monster king. It looked like it should have had a wall separating it from the rest of the space, but it did not.

On the right side of the room, a desk leaned against the wall that held a door to my room. Behind the desk was a large meeting table, a set of couches, and a window.

An entrance in the far corner led to what I assumed was a washroom.

The entire suite had been completely untouched by the flames, confirming without any doubt that it was a magical attack on me.

After I had time to silently survey Aedan's personal chambers, he cleared his throat. "This used to be a sitting room. I had the walls removed after the curse because my drekkan fit better without them." His voice tapered off. "Though it might make things awkward now."

He swallowed loudly. "It doesn't need to be awkward." He hadn't let go of my hand since I'd taken his in my room. Now, he turned toward me and wrapped it in both of his hands. "Callista." His voice dropped into a hoarse, emotional tone. "I want to give you my room."

He tipped his chin toward the bed. "My bed chambers are yours now." He turned his head toward the desk. "I'll live in the sitting room." He met my eyes. "Pretend the walls are still up. I won't cross into your space without permission. I'll leave the entire room if you tell me to. But I cannot risk leaving you alone again."

I wasn't sure how to respond. Share a room with the king? That seemed wildly inappropriate. Strangely enough, though, the thought of being alone was far more terrifying.

He dropped his forehead down to meet mine. He had done this a few times now, and it erased all my anxious feelings with other... uncertain ones every time. The heat from his skin mixed with a fluttering in my heart that wanted to draw closer to him... to touch more than his forehead.

"If I could go back to that winter day when I first met you," he whispered, "and face you knowing then what I know now, I would have dropped to my knees and begged for your forgiveness. I would have sent you home with your brother..." His voice caught and he swallowed. "But I did not. And now I have trapped you here with someone who is trying to kill you. I just want to keep you safe."

I brought my free hand to hold on to his. "You don't have any guest rooms?"

"I do, but the nobles use them for meals or other gatherings." His breath warmed the air in front of my face. We were so close. If I twitched, our lips would touch.

As if hearing my thoughts, he tipped his chin down so our foreheads still touched, but his mouth was just a little farther from mine. It made my own breathing hitch. I had so many feelings for this elf, but he was a king. The King of the Elves should not kiss a forest-raised half-fae. He was probably supposed to marry a queen from one of the other elf kingdoms someday.

But he tightened his hold on my hands. “The guest rooms are not secure and can be accessed by multiple doors, windows, and corridors. I will take you there if you truly want me to, but I would rather give you this room. Nothing is more protected than this tower.”

I turned to look at his bed again, pulling my head away from his. I wanted to collapse on that bed. I would feel a thousand times safer here than anywhere else. But... “Where would you sleep?”

He pointed at the couches with his chin. “They are longer than I am tall, and they’re plenty comfortable. If you don’t mind, I might take one of the pillows off the bed.”

Piles of pillows covered half the bed. Maybe he saved them for his drekkan self. I nodded slowly. “All I really want right now is to sleep.”

He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed my wrist. Slowly. As if making a statement that incinerated all my earlier thoughts about how he couldn’t kiss me. I couldn’t guess what *he* wanted to say, but *I* heard sympathy and care, tenderness and power leashed on a tight chain, warmth and concern. I heard love, whispered on the silent breath of his lips against the sensitive skin on my wrist.

He straightened up and whispered, “I know.” Then he pointed at the bed and added, “Come.”

It felt like an invitation more than an order. How a few months can change so many things! I followed him to the far side of his room. *My* room. At least until whoever was attacking me was gone. He paced ahead of me, opened one of the wardrobes, and handed me two pieces of clothing.

I held them up and raised a brow to meet his mischievous smile. “A tunic and a jacket? For a king?”

The mischievous smile grew a little wilder. “They’ll cover you better than any nightdress and dressing gown. And I don’t like the idea of ashes in my bed.”

I threw the jacket at his face. The shock in his eyes was worth it—I nearly laughed out loud. “I thought you said it was my bed.”

His smile hit his eyes. “It is. And you can drown it in ashes if you choose. But just in case you change your mind—” He tossed the jacket back at me. I caught it and buried my face in the rich smells of his leather and cedar. I would probably sleep much better wrapped in the scents that reminded me of him than in the ashes of my near-death experience.

I pointed at the door to the hall. “You can’t be in here while I change.”

He dipped his head and left the room.

I peeled off my damaged dress and underclothes. Even the layers closest to my skin smelled like smoke. I stuffed them all in a trash bin.

When I lifted his tunic to my face, though, I couldn’t put it on—not while I smelled like a charred wrap of hay. I dropped the tunic on the bed and let my feet take over my mind. They insisted on a walk to the washroom.

I rinsed under the bath water as it fell—I didn’t want Aedan to decide I was taking too long and come check on me. When I lathered his soap, though, the spiced cedar slowed me down. All this time, I’d thought his cedar scent came from spending time in the forest as a drekkan. But no. It was his soap.

The fresh smells filled the air, bathing my senses as much as my skin. I lathered another round of soap, and then a third. When I could not detect a trace of smoke, I turned off the water, dried myself, and changed into his tunic and jacket.

The jacket wrapped around me as easily as a blanket. I snuggled inside it and leaned my head against the door. “Aedan? Can you hear me?”

His voice came immediately, also next to the door. “Yes. Are you done?”

The image of him leaning against the door in the hall during my entire bath made me chuckle. “Have you been standing there this whole time?”

“Yes.”

The jacket’s warm folds hid my arms, and I did not want to take them out.
“You can come in.”

He opened the door, scanned me from top to bottom, and then settled his gaze on my face while my favorite half-crazed smile scrawled over his features. “You look a hundred times better.”

I huffed. “Because I’m wearing your clothes?”

“Because you look refreshed. I hope you enjoyed the bath.”

“You knew I was bathing?”

He nodded. “The magic that pipes water into the washrooms is easy to feel.” I should have known. He gestured to the bed. “Would you like me to stay in the hall until you fall asleep?”

I shook my head as images of my bed combusting flashed through my mind. “Is there anything you can do to make my bed, your bed, the bed I’m sleeping on...” I trailed off. Nobody would attack me while I was in *the king’s room*, right?

His hand raised, like he was going to touch my cheek, but he stopped just before I felt his fingers. He shifted his hand to wave at his bed. “I can put a barrier around it that will block any magic.” His voice lowered. “And should anyone be foolish enough to attempt an attack while I am here, they will not survive the event.”

His threatening growl should have made my skin crawl, but instead it eased the fears that had been hanging on me since we’d visited my razed room. I felt safer with him in sight.

I tightened his jacket around my arms and climbed into the bed. Maybe I’d crawl out of the jacket when I was under the blankets. Maybe not.

He put a hand on a corner bedpost and wrapped his bright, fiery magic around the bed. A dark red layer of magic surrounded us like a gappy fence. Then thick cords of yellow, rope-like power wove through the red, filling in the gaps and securing both colors in a wall around us. I thought he was done, but streaks of orange burst to life and flowed through any

remaining cracks in the other colors. And then an even darker red sparkled across all the other colors, like evening sunlight glistening across a lake.

A satisfied gleam lit his eyes as he turned to me. “What do you see, Firehawk?”

I nestled deeper in the sheets. “You’ve made a barrier that looks completely impenetrable, with at least four different sets of magic.”

“That is an incredible gift.” He settled his hands on the top of the footboard’s rail. “I know you don’t feel like it is powerful, but I am glad you can see the protections I have layered here.” He cast a pointed look across the room and then back to me. “And should anything happen, I will be in the sitting room.”

I nudged a blanket up to my chin. He had set everything up perfectly, and a deep exhaustion pushed me toward sleep faster than I’d expected. I muttered a deliberate, “Thank you,” before closing my eyes. The last thing I saw before slipping into a blissful unconsciousness was him standing at the foot of my bed with his hands on the rail, guarding like a soldier who cared more than he allowed himself to admit.



A thick forest fire ignited the trees around me. I spun, unsure of my location and frightened by the flames. There was no escape path.

Just as I started to panic, the flames all dissolved and a bridge appeared with flowers wrapped around a railing. I knew it was a safe bridge, so I ran across it and arrived in the gardens behind the castle. The snow had melted, and beautiful flowers lined the paths to the fountains. My mother stood in front of the three-tiered fountain.

I ran to her and threw my arms around her waist. “Motab!” I whispered into her dress. “I’ve missed you so much!”

She wrapped me in such a tight hug I laughed.

And then I realized the truth. “You... you don’t exist anymore. This must be a dream.”

She squeezed me tighter. “Oh, Callista. To be fae is to exist. We do not stop existing simply because our essence leaves the mortal realm.”

I leaned into her. “What do you mean?”

She stroked the back of my head. “I am with you in every fire, every blanket that warms you, and each ray of heat from the sun. They should all remind you of me—they are silent messages of my love for you. Fotab is with you in every book, every text you lovingly read, every note you hear on a lute, even every song. People you love never really leave you. They are with you every time you remember them.”

My eyes filled with tears. “But I still miss you. I want to hold you in real life and hear you celebrate all the good things with me... or tell me the bad and confusing will work out...” I hiccupped.

She kissed the top of my head. “I know, sweetie. It is the tragically beautiful nature of our existence.”

I leaned back and looked at her. “Tragically beautiful?”

She patted my arm. “Every wonderful moment we experience is overshadowed by the threat of loss. Every loss we experience is tempered by the joyful memories we hold.” She squeezed my hand. “Take care in your grief to both give yourself time to heal and still make room for new happy moments. Let them fill your life with meaning even while you save space to feel the loss.”

“I’m trying,” I told her. “I’m trying so hard.”

She patted my arm and looked over her shoulder. “I need to go now. Fotab has prepared a treat for us. We both love you.”

“But—”

The dream faded, and I opened my eyes to a dark, unfamiliar room.

Aedan’s room.





CHAPTER 26: AEDAN

Callista startled. She shifted under her blankets and sniffed.

No overwhelming sadness flowed through the bond, but I could not ignore her silent cries. But...

Would she call if she wanted me? Not likely. The things she asked for were few and hard to predict. Even the shield around her bed—it had been painfully clear what she wanted, but she had refused to ask.

And I had promised to stay on my side of the room.

She sniffed again.

Burning ashes and flaming rivers. I could not just lie on the settee and listen to her cry.

I left the couch and walked to the invisible line where a wall had once separated my sitting room from my sleeping quarters. “Callista? Callista, may I come and sit by you?”

“Mm hmm.” Her answer was closer to a squeak than a word, but it was an affirmative squeak.

I crossed the threshold into her room and approached the side of the bed where she’d curled into one pillow and hugged another. After the day she’d had, she should have been exhausted enough to sleep all night, so

something must have woken her. Or else she woke on her own and something kept her awake.

I perched on the edge of a large armchair and leaned toward the bed. “Will you tell me why you’re awake?”

She scooted closer to the edge of the bed and reached a hand toward me. The armchair was too far from the bed for me to reach her, so I dragged the whole thing closer and took her hand with one of mine.

She gripped mine tighter than I expected. “I had a dream,” she whispered, “and it reminded me how much I missed my mother.”

A lump grew in my throat. My own mother had been the kindest person I’d known. Perhaps that was something that had drawn me to Callista. She shared my mother’s kindness. And I had missed that kindness more than I’d admitted to anyone, including myself.

But this was not about me. Callista was the one who needed comforting in the loss of her mother. I did not deserve to be that person, but... she had allowed me to come closer.

And she had reached for me.

I ran my thumb along the back of her palm. “Would you tell me about your dream?”

She nodded and inched even closer to the edge of the bed. “I saw my mother.” And in between sniffs and swallows, she told me about a conversation with her mother.

The dream was short, but powerful. It made me think of my mother again. Perhaps she, too, was with me in every gentle word and kind decision that I made. She would have certainly wanted me to build new memories—to fill my life with happiness and... love.

Callista lay buried in blankets, though they’d fallen away from her face enough to reveal that she still wore my jacket. But inside all those blankets and pillows, she looked alone. So very alone.

And in that observation, my heart pitched itself toward hers. I wanted to make her feel safe and wanted, whole and complete—whatever the

opposite of alone might be, I wanted to give it to her. In sharing her vulnerable dream, she gave me the strength to risk my own rejection.

“Callista, may I... hold you?”

Her face jerked up toward mine, and even in the dark I felt the strange mixture of her intense eyes with her exposed emotions. “Would you?”

I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed a knuckle. “I would consider it a privilege.” I stood up and tossed the pillow in front of her to the far side of the bed before scooping her—along with a pile of blankets—into my arms and settling back onto the large armchair.

She settled into the chair with me and rested her head against the side of my chest. I wrapped an arm around her, and her blankets, and pulled her close. She took a deep breath and relaxed her entire body as she breathed out.

This, my heart shouted at me. *This is what your life is missing.* And then the cursed organ practically hummed in satisfaction. On an impulse, I bent over and kissed the top of Callista’s head.

She wrapped an arm around my waist in a spontaneous hug. I tightened my arms in an embrace as well. Her unpredictable nature had captured my heart.

“Do you think it was real?” she whispered, muffling her words against my tunic.

It took me a moment to figure out what she meant. “Your dream?”

Her head shifted in a silent nod. “Do you think people who’ve passed can visit us in dreams?”

I ran a hand along her arm in what I hoped was a comforting touch. “I don’t know. I... I don’t feel qualified to tell you my thoughts.”

She swatted at my arm and huffed a soft snort. “Tell me anyway.”

I wiped a lock of hair away from her face. “Bossy.”

“Please?” She didn’t look at me. “I need to hear someone’s thoughts besides my own.”

I swallowed. “I... I think you should choose to believe it was real.”

She tipped her head to look at me. “Why?”

“Well...” Hopefully this did not come out wrong. “Whether she really came to you or your mind created the dream—does it change the truth or the meaning of what she said? I... Just listening to you tell it made me want to pursue the good things in my life more. So why not believe it if it will make your life better? Wouldn’t that make it real?”

She dropped her gaze and snuggled against my side. “I think I’d just like to know that she’s still out there in some unseen world, aware of me, and that I’ll see her again.”

I turned so I could wrap both arms around her while I swallowed fresh emotions of my own. “But we can’t *know* that, not really. Not with any proof. And...”

My own opinions on the topic were forming as I thought about her wish. “I think we have two choices. We can believe the people we love still exist somewhere, or we can believe they do not. If we go with the first, then we spend the rest of our lives happier in the hope that we’ll see them again. We miss them in both cases, but if we go with the second, we don’t have anything to look forward to.”

I tightened my hug around her, hoping my thoughts did not offend her. “If we’re wrong about the first, the only harm done is the years of hope we enjoyed, but we won’t even be around to realize the error. If we’re wrong about the second, we’ll regret the years we could have enjoyed with more hope. And I think I’d rather make the mistake of believing the first and finding it wrong than believing the second and finding it wrong.”

She chuckled. “That’s a very logical approach to it all.”

I kissed the top of her head again. “I apologize for my lack of spontaneous emotional reactions. I... I’ve been trying to control my more explosive emotions better, but it’s made me more thoughtful about... everything.”

She reached out of her cocoon of blankets, pulled one of my hands to her face, and kissed the base of my thumb. A fire of energy ran like sparks of lightning from where her lips touched my skin all the way to my heart, and the cursed organ tried jumping straight out of my chest to reach her.

“Firehawk,” I whispered, “you’ll burn my heart down if you do things like that.”

She gripped my hand and brought it close to her heart. “Don’t you dare apologize for being thoughtful,” she whispered back. “And while we’re on the topic, don’t apologize for a lack of emotional reactions either. You have the most beautiful emotions, and I love every moment you share them with me.”

I love you. She might have had other words in there too, but I only heard those three. My heart latched onto them as if she had given it permission to love her too.

But my head knew better. It knew how tired she was—how exhausted from the fire and an emotional dream—and I refused to take advantage of a careless slip of her tongue. She was not crying any longer, but she’d returned to her regular fiery self, so I turned and lifted her and her bundle of blankets back to the bed.

Her closed eyes flew open. “Are you leaving?”

No, never! my heart urged my mouth to answer, but my mouth had too much practice shutting down my emotions. Instead of saying anything right away, I cleared a few errant hairs away from her face and brushed my thumb on her cheek. “I think you need to sleep.”

She covered my hand with hers and pressed it against the side of her head. “I don’t think I’ll fall asleep any time soon.”

“What if…” My mind raced. Surely I could find an answer that would be honorable and responsible while offering her comfort and easing the ache that my heart insisted on presenting. And then I knew. “What if I played for you?”

Her eyebrows lifted just enough that I sensed her question. I bent down and kissed her forehead, then went to the wardrobe shelf and pulled out a

case that hadn't been opened for years. I left the case in the wardrobe and took a lute to the armchair.

She sat up in bed when I started to tune it. “You play?”

I tightened the next string. Years of sitting on a shelf had not done it any favors, but it was a well-made instrument. It would play beautifully in a few moments. “I have the education of a prince of Hemlit. Of course it included music.”

She straightened and leaned toward me, waving a hand. “And all these weeks—months—that I've been trying to learn to play from a book?”

I moved on to another set of strings. “I wanted to help more than you could imagine. But it didn't seem appropriate.”

“Appropriate? Exactly what, Aedan, about anything in our relationship is appropriate?”

That question hit me like an anvil just as I finished tuning. I looked up to find her fiery gaze fixed on me like I'd said something wrong. *What about our relationship was appropriate?* Everything!

“Callista, I have burned my own desires to ashes to make sure I didn't do anything inappropriate.” I refused to take advantage of the fact that she was stuck here, regardless of the feelings I had for her.

Her voice dropped to a husky, but intense, whisper. “What desires, Aedan?”

What desires? How could she not know? My heart beat like a wild beast trying to escape a cage. *Tell her!* it screamed. *Tell her how you feel!*

“I...” I was not so brave. She was the one who could say anything that crossed her mind. I was stuck debating if my words would lead to the death of my kingdom. My thumb slipped, striking the chanterelle. The string pierced the air with a note and gave me an idea.

“Lay down,” I said. “There's an old ballad that contains my desires. Let me sing it for you.”

“You’re telling me what to do again.” She said the words, but there was no heat in her voice, and she laid down at the same time. “I think I’ve figured something out.”

I strummed the lute, testing my tuning. “Oh?”

“Mm hmm,” she muttered. “You get bossy when you’re nervous or afraid.”

I strummed again, trying to pretend her words didn’t tear into my heart. Were they true? “Perhaps. If so, I apologize. Apparently I am not as good at tempering my emotions as I thought.”

She chuckled. “It’s okay to be scared, Aedan.”

I tested out the chords for the song I wanted to sing to her. “Perhaps.”

She pulled a blanket around herself, and I began the song.

*‘Tis simple now to walk the road
That’s paved with rocks and stone,
But yesteryear was close, you know,
When I walked here all alone.*

*There was no paving, no road signs,
No light to show the way.
I fell in darkness, cold and bleak,
Not wanting one more day.*

I played the interlude twice, suddenly anxious about the confessions the next lines brought. But I told her I would share, and so I took a deep breath and plowed on.

*But shock of all, your fire found me,
You brightened up the sky.
You lit the road and burned my heart,
You gave me wings to fly.*

*Oh, I will bless your fire—
And carry your light,
Build on the brightness
And suffer every night.*

*There is no darkness,
No terror too sharp—
Nothing that I won't face
For the chance at your heart.*

*I will feed your fire
And praise the light anew,
Spare you every pain,
'Til I prove my heart is true—*

I glanced at her, hoping my truth had not traumatized her. She had sat back up and was staring at me with such a hopeful, happy expression that my heart took courage and excitedly offered her the next verse.

*And when you can trust the words that
I speak from my mind,
I will offer my heart in the
Purest ties that bind.*

*Oh, I will bless your fire—
And carry your light,
Build on the brightness
And suffer every night.*

*There is no darkness,
No terror too sharp—
Nothing that I won't face
For the chance at your heart.*

*I will feed your fire
And praise the light anew,
Spare you every pain,
'Til I prove my heart is true—*

*We will burn the world
And light the skies we view,
Torch every trial,
With the pow'r of me and you—*

My flames and my firehawk... the thought of them taking on the world together filled my voice with passion.

*We will burn the world
And light the skies we view,
Torch every trial,
With the flames of love so true.*

*There is no path too dark and no
Unknown left to fear
Because the certainty of you
Is always here.*

*We will burn the world
And light the skies we view,
Torch every trial,
With the flames of love so true.*

I played the final refrain again without singing any words, suddenly wondering if I'd read her wrong and said too much. But it was what I felt. If it came back to curse me, then... so be it.

I risked looking at her again. A faint sheen glistened over her eyes, as if she might start crying again, but... no sad feelings came through the bond at all. Instead, a new impression washed over me. Something like a warm breeze carrying a hopeful happiness.

"That song," she asked, "contains your desires?"

I nodded. "I... you... I didn't know how dark my life was until you lit it up. I would do anything—everything—for you, but... you deserve so much more than me. I... I don't even love myself. I don't want to burden you with me and my darkness."

She raised her brows. "And what about the burden that I am to you?"

I shook my head. "You are no burden."





CHAPTER 27: CALLISTA

I climbed out of my blanket, slid off the bed, and sat on the edge of the chair by Aedan. He straightened and shifted so we could both fit easily.

I set one of my hands on his while it still held the lute's body. He thought he was so broken and beastly that he didn't see all the good things he did. "I have just as many issues as you. We've already discussed how disasters follow me everywhere I go. If you want to risk loving me, then you should let me risk loving you too."

He dropped the lute and let it balance on his lap while raising a hand to my head. I closed my eyes and leaned my cheek into his palm. He traced my cheekbone with his thumb. "Firehawk. You can't imagine what those words are doing to my soul."

"Probably something very similar to what your song did to mine," I whispered.

His other hand cradled the back of my head while he pressed a kiss into my forehead. Heat erupted from the contact with his skin and spread like the sun over my entire face.

His lips grazed my forehead as he asked, "Do you trust me?"

I reached across the lute to hold his neck. “More than anyone I’ve ever known.”

He kissed the corner of my mouth and whispered across my cheek. “I’ve loved you for weeks.”

I turned my head the smallest degree to meet his lips. He kissed with a slow and gentle caution, but the heat from his touch ran from my lips to my heart. I’d loved him for weeks too, but I’d never thought he’d actually return those feelings, not with the way he’d kept such a tight rein on his emotions recently.

As the moments deepened, his caution dissolved and the kiss grew into a thrilling expression of trust and passion. His power erupted around us, dancing across my skin, lighting my magic sensors in a fiery display, and wrapping me in a cocoon of safety that permeated deep in my soul. His love called to me, and my heart embraced it. I never wanted to leave him again.

But eventually, he pulled back, kissed my cheek, and rested his against it. “I love you,” he whispered. “I feel it in my bones and sinews. The very blood in my veins wants you. If you were an elf who lived in my kingdom, I would ask you to marry me, and I would ask your parents to bless our union. As it is, I don’t know what—”

A loud crashing sound from my incinerated room interrupted him, along with a voice yelling. “No! That monster! I thought he’d changed. I’ll kill him, Jolter. So help me, if he can do this...”

Koan trailed off, probably listening to something Jolter said. A few seconds later, a violent banging shook the bedroom door. The bedroom we were in.

I chuckled. “I think Koan wants to talk to you.”

Aedan smirked, kissed my forehead again, and left me with his lute. As he walked to the door, he unfurled his power and smoke rose from his body.

The elf had a sick sense of humor.

He threw the door open, and used his magic to make his deadly whisper fill the entire hall and room. “Nobody pounds on my door like that.”

Koan shoved him—actually pushed against his chest hard enough to knock him into the bedroom. “How could you kill her! She only ever did what you wanted her to. Complied with every ridiculous order—”

He cut off abruptly and froze—literally—midstep with his hands raised. Yellow magic surrounded him, freezing him midair. It was easy to forget the power Aedan wielded when he smiled at me nervously or bared his soul in a song, but then he did something like this—like freezing Koan with a thought—and I remembered. My cursed king had the powers of a fae prince and an elf king. His strength filled the entire room.

Aedan dusted invisible dirt off his chest and glanced at Jolter, who still stood in the doorway, shock and horror drawn across his face. Then the king shifted his gaze to Koan and released all his magic. “Peace, Koan. Callista is fine.” He pointed one hand at me.

Koan bent over, with hands on his knees, and blew out a breath. When he stood, he nodded at Aedan. “I’m sorry. I saw the ashes and assumed—”

Aedan waved the apology away. “It is fine. I am glad to know you are more fond of Callista than me.”

Jolter slipped around their conversation and gave me a massive hug. “We thought you were dead.”

I patted his back. “Not yet, though someone is clearly trying harder.”

Koan wrapped his arms around both of us, squeezing tighter than Jolter had, before turning back to the king. “The people I would have pegged as most likely to attempt a murder do not have fire magic.”

Aedan nodded. “I can only think of three elves besides myself who are capable of this kind of an attack.” His scan took in all three of us. “Acantha, Forten, and Shancy. It is possible there are others in Bridgetown or the other hamlets as well.”

Koan looked at Jolter before answering. “I can’t imagine Forten or Shancy doing it.” He glanced at me. “Forten loves you, and Shancy hasn’t ever

said anything negative about fae or humans.”

“She is very deliberate in what she does, though,” Jolter said. “If she thought she might ever attack, she would be careful not to ever say something that would incriminate herself.”

“True,” Koan agreed, turning to Aedan. “What about your aunt? She doesn’t talk to anyone besides you, Mylo, and Fagan.”

“She is my primary suspect,” Aedan said, “though Callista has convinced me not to act until I am certain beyond any doubt. And you have just confirmed the small doubts I had about Shancy.”

“Typical,” Koan muttered, throwing me a false glare. “I expect she won’t let you do much once your doubts *are* removed.” I grinned at him, and he turned back to Aedan. “Does your aunt know she survived or are you hiding her?”

“I do not think she knows yet, though—” He turned to me. “She will learn within a few days. She comes here for meetings at least once or twice a week.”

Jolter and Koan shared a look, and Koan said, “We’ll take you for the meetings. Just tell us when they are, and we’ll have our own meetings.” Koan’s classic humor-filled smirk scrawled across his face as he spoke, almost like he was threatening Aedan with his generous offer.

Jolter rolled his eyes, and Aedan muttered, “Flames help me. I’m plotting with villains.”

Koan laughed out loud. “Admit it, you love our villainy. But we’ll need to plan our guest list carefully. How many people know you’re alive?”

“Just us and Mylo,” I said.

Koan clicked his tongue. “Well, the secret’s out, then. Mylo will tell Corva, and she’ll tell someone in the greatest of confidences, who will pass on the secret. By the end of the day, the entire fortress will be talking about it.”

Aedan sighed. “It’s probably just as well. I think I’d rather flaunt their failed attempt in their faces and reiterate that I will be with you constantly

now. Anyone who tries anything again can expect to die in the attempt.”

Koan and Jolter grinned, and then Koan bowed to Aedan. “Your Majesty, I do want to apologize for assuming you killed my friend. I should have known better, and I’m sorry.”

Aedan smiled slowly and extended his hand. Koan returned the gesture, and they gripped arms. “Koan. I am fortunate to have you in the castle.” He glanced at Jolter. “You and Jolter both. It is good to know we have a few people here we can trust.”

I sidled up next to Aedan’s side and slipped an arm around his waist as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “You two are my best friends,” I told Jolter and Koan. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Just call us the Fellowship of Fun.” Koan grinned like he’d discovered a new secret and then gestured between Aedan and I. “Does anyone else know about this?”

I grinned and shook my head. Koan elbowed Jolter. “Did you see that? Now we’re in the royal inner circle.”

Heat radiating off of Aedan filtered through my clothes and warmed my shoulders. He was hotter than usual. I glanced at the window. How had I missed the rising sun?

Koan and Jolter followed my gaze to the window and shared another look with each other. “We can wait in the hall.” Koan turned a raised brow to me. “Do you want to come with us?”

I turned to Aedan, easily spotting his clenched jaw and fire-like colors running along the blood vessels under his skin. “Don’t leave the hall,” he ground out. “Please.”

I squeezed his hand. “We’ll wait right outside the door.”

He drew my hand up to his lips and kissed the inside of my wrist, sending a burning heat into my skin and a fluttering thrill to my heart. “Thank you.”







CHAPTER 28: AEDAN

Callista laughed and rolled onto her back on the bed. She'd been reading a book about humans. I'd brought it in here months ago to try and figure out her behavior—back when I thought everything about her could be explained by either her fae or her human origins. She'd been laughing about it all afternoon.

“This says that humans are driven by base, carnal instincts, and that they lack basic sympathies and affections that make relationships meaningful to elves.” She fixed a fake glare on me. “How can you believe this nonsense?”

I rolled my eyes. “It is nothing compared to what our literature says about fae.” She laughed again.

Spending the day as a drekkan with her in my room was a new kind of torture. I wanted to wrap her in my arms—my elf arms—and hold her again. I wanted to touch her face and kiss her. I wanted to talk with her about marriage, but I refused to do it when I could not hold her as we did so.

My curse had never been more cruel.

As the window outside darkened, I realized a new problem: I did not want Callista to be alone in the hall by herself, but I also did not want her to

watch me shift back into an elf. Would she be upset if I asked her to wait in the washroom?

Just as I gathered up the courage to ask her, a knock rescued me. Mylo's voice called in. "Your Majesty?"

I ignored him and turned to Callista. "It seems Mylo has arrived. Would you wait in the hall with him for a few minutes while I shift back into an elf?"

She turned to the window, and her eyes widened. "How did I miss that?" she mumbled to herself, crossing to the door and tightening my jacket around herself. She opened the door to Mylo, waved at me, and then slipped out into the hallway.

My transformation took only a few seconds, but the pain that burned through my bones as they dissolved and reformed left me breathless and shaking for at least a minute afterward. It was not something I wanted anyone to witness. But this pain brought me back to a form that would let me approach Callista. She had brought meaning to my eternal torture, and if she was willing to love half an elf... I would be a fool to push her away.

When I opened the door, Mylo was talking. "...I sent a message to the dressmaker. He should still have your measurements. I expect he'll arrive any moment." Koan had been right—Mylo didn't see any reason to keep her survival a secret.

He bowed to me. "Your Majesty. I have news. Your cousin has been reported in Bridgetown. We expect he'll be here before the night is over. Forten is preparing for an event."

"Robin?" If he'd found a way around the cursed barrier, he might be able to help with the shifting too.

"No," Mylo said slowly. "Guyan."

"Oh." I chuckled. He wasn't the brother to me that Robin had been, but he'd still help. "I know he wasn't your favorite, but if he got through the barrier, he probably has ideas on ways to end the curse too."

Mylo bowed his head.

Flaming rivers. I hated that. It had never bothered me before, but now—seeing him submit when he clearly disagreed with me felt like grinding my teeth across glass. “Mylo.”

How did I say what I was thinking without appearing weak? I looked at Callista and knew what she’d say. Power meant nothing without kindness. She’d just spill her thoughts and let them land how they may. I braced myself and let the words fall.

“Mylo. You have been my right hand for more than a decade, my eyes and sword when I could not be present because of a curse. You have more than earned your right to have an opinion different than mine. Do not bury it out of any sense of decorum or duty.”

The captain bowed again, but this time felt different. “Thank you.” Did he stand a little taller, or did I imagine it? “In that case, Your Majesty, may I recommend caution? I know he has always been supportive and friendly to you, but I have seen others suffer under the short end of his anger.”

I nodded. “Of course.” Callista slipped her hand through my arm. Did she realize the battle that had just happened inside me? Did she know I still struggled? Her hand on mine strengthened my position, though, and made it easier to ask the question that hovered in my mind. “Mylo, could you not say the same of me? That you’ve seen people suffer under my anger?”

He huffed a silent chuckle and glanced at Callista. “I have not seen such things in months. And when I did see it, your anger was always justifiable, and your justice was not unexpected. Guyan makes me nervous because his vengeance does not always make sense and...”

He trailed off, as if debating if I really wanted to hear his thoughts. I waited, hoping I wouldn’t have to emphasize his position again.

Finally, he blew out a puff of air. “The thing is, Your Majesty, I suspect him in quite a few unsolved crimes from many years ago, much like I suspect your aunt started the fire yesterday. I cannot prove anything, and I would not have dared mention a suspicion of royalty before this moment, but that is the source of my discomfort with him.” He shrugged. “He is generally well-liked amongst nobles and seems popular, but I cannot shake my discomfort around him.”

I covered Callista's hand with mine, grateful I'd risked telling Mylo my thoughts. "Thank you, Mylo. I will exercise caution."

As he left to prepare for my cousin's arrival, I turned to Callista. "I hate myself for asking you this," I said, squeezing her hand gently, "but I feel I must. Would you please accompany me to the Dining Hall for dinner tonight?"

She raised both brows in an obvious question of my sanity, so I rushed to explain. "As my cousin, Guyan is royalty. His return, especially when he's been trapped outside the barrier for thirteen years, demands an event. If I did not attend as host, my capacity to rule would be severely questioned. Nobles would push for him to assume the throne. He'd never do such a thing—we've always been friends—but the opinions of the court would be difficult to manage."

Now my voice dropped as the real danger leaked into my words. "And I don't want to risk you being out of my sight again."

She squeezed my wrist and pursed her lips. The cute little pucker drew my thumb to them like a moth to flame. I traced over them, breathing easier when she closed her eyes and relaxed. "Please say yes," I whispered.

She kissed my thumb and then slid my hand to her cheek, where she leaned into it. "What if I don't want to?" Flames burn me. I'd do anything for her. One touch on my skin, and I was clay in her hands.

"It's your choice. Always. I won't override you." I bent down enough to kiss the top of her head, right in the middle of the hall. "I will stand here and beg you to spare me the worry of a night away from you, but I will not force you to go anywhere that you do not choose yourself. You have the entire castle to choose from. Any room. Every corner. It's all yours."

She reached up to my neck and nudged my head down. I bent until our foreheads touched. "I don't think you understand," she whispered. "I don't want to go to the Dining Hall again, but I don't want to leave you more. And just as much, I don't want to create difficulties for your rule."

My heart sped up. "Does that mean you'll come?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I'll come."





CHAPTER 29: CALLISTA

Moments after I'd agreed to attend dinner with Aedan, the dressmaker entered the hall with a large cart. He'd apologized for the shortage of appropriate items, promised to bring more soon, and left me with piles of clothes.

Now I wore a new white dress with a corset-style bodice and a lacy skirt that flared and swirled as we walked to the Dining Hall. Aedan had insisted on waiting for a maid to do my hair, so now I looked like a princess. I expected someone to jump out from a corner and yell, "Imposter!" at every turn, but... nobody did.

Our trip to the Dining Hall was completely unremarkable.

Just before we crossed the final curtain that would dump us on the royal dais, Aedan stopped. He cupped the side of my face with one hand and brushed his cheek up against mine, whispering in my ear. "Firehawk. You are gorgeous. People tonight will see you with admiration or jealousy. Do not let their reactions upset you."

He paused, and then added, "Oh, Callista. I will bless your fire, and carry your light. I am glad you are here." He grazed my cheek with a soft kiss, and then straightened, placing my hand on top of his forearm in a more formal hold than the comfortable one we'd had as we walked. "This is how

the King of Hemlit should introduce a royal peer from another kingdom to his people.”

And before my heart could finish floating out of my chest, he straightened, threw the curtains apart, and sauntered onto the dais.

I stayed with him, standing tall like I imagined a princess might, and forcing a smile on my face. We stopped at the edge of the dais, in the same place we had months ago when he’d first warned everyone not to hurt me. The entire room shifted, like a great wave, as everyone rose from their seats and bowed.

Unlike last time, the faces I saw as they stood back up looked at me with curiosity. I didn’t see any of the anger and venom that I’d seen the first time. Did they not realize who I was?

Some did. Jolter grinned. Next to him, Molanna smiled, and on the other side of her, Koan winked. I could feel Aedan restrain a groan, which made my smile relax into an almost-chuckle.

Another wave shifted the room as people slid away from the center to make an aisle to the dais between their bodies. A tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired elf sauntered along the new aisle until he stood on the floor right in front of us. He bowed dramatically.

Aedan tipped his head in a small, polite gesture, so I imitated it. “Cousin,” the king said, “welcome home.” He gestured to his table on the dais behind us, and the crowd—hundreds of elves—broke into a cheer.

The cousin smiled—a beautiful, well-practiced smile—and climbed the six steps to join us on the dais. Aedan waved at the crowd, and the room filled with the general chatter of hundreds of conversations. He led me back to his table, where we joined his cousin, Fagan, Mylo, and his aunt.

Servants brought platters and platters of meats, breads, vegetables, and desserts. Before they’d finished setting them down, the cousin started the conversation. “Aedan, I heard you had a new human, but nobody told me she was prettier than any of the elves.”

He made me sound like a pet.

Aedan set a hand on my knee under the table. “Her name is Callista, and she belongs to herself, not me.” He tipped his head toward me and spread a drawling smile across his face. “Callista, this uncouth barbarian is my cousin Guyan. He’s normally much better behaved.”

“My apologies. Callista, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Guyan’s apology came out smooth and polished. I could see why he made Mylo nervous. Everything he said, even these casual comments, sounded both too practiced and too natural. It reminded me of the most innocent smile and perfect answers Alastor used to come up with when he had actually done something he should be in trouble for.

Guyan tore a bite of bread off a roll. “I am normally much more polite, but the years of attempting to defeat the curse have taken a toll.” His gaze swept up the entire table. “Hemlit has needed its king, and I’ve tried all sorts of things to get through the curse’s boundary to you.”

Aedan sipped something from a goblet. He saw me glance at him and smiled. “You’ll like it, Callista. I believe Forten had you in mind when he prepared it.”

I tasted my drink. Lemonade. I wanted to leave the hall and hug the giant cook, but instead, I simply said, “That was kind of him.”

Guyan nodded at me. “You’ve done better for yourself than I expected. The stories I heard from your brother made me think I’d need to storm the dungeon and free you from chains.”

“You spoke to my brother?” I nearly jumped up from the table.

The cousin chuckled. “Yes. I’ve been in Terrarinmarin for some time, but when I returned to the hills a few weeks ago, rumors of a human going crazy at the border of Sirun made me curious. I found him, and we talked quite a bit.”

Guyan tossed a grape into his mouth and waved his hand toward Aedan. “Did you know her brother can break the barrier? Both the fae’s curse and the protective layers you put up before that?”

Aedan’s hand held my knee a little tighter, as if the pressure would keep him calm. “I did know.”

Guyan leaned over the table. “Aedan. You could use him to end the curse. Think what that would mean for everyone here. You included—are you still a monster during the day?”

Aedan’s voice tightened. “I am.”

“So why not use this human to break the fae’s hold on you?”

Aedan stiffened, so I dropped a hand under the table and touched his. He flipped his palm over and gripped mine with an almost-frantic force, as if apologizing all over again for the day we’d met. “Two reasons,” he ground out.

Guyan leaned back and picked up another grape. “Do tell.”

“One. I do not know where he is, and I cannot leave the barrier myself to find him. Two, I do not think he would be amenable to helping me.”

Guyan laughed. “I’d forgotten how strict and somber you were. Let me solve all your problems. One. He is roaming the woods outside the boundary to Sirun, trying to convince someone to come rescue his sister.” He dipped his chin dramatically at me. “Who clearly does not need rescuing. He refuses to enter the boundary himself because he thinks it would mean her death.”

He looked at me expectantly, as if I should explain the question he didn’t ask. I met his eyes and lifted my chin. I did not feel obligated to explain anything to him, and I already agreed with Mylo. He was up to something.

Aedan’s aunt sniffed. “That’s because the entire reason Callista is here is as collateral to keep her brother out.”

Aedan leaned forward. “No. That was the reason she *came* here. She is now my guest, and I have already explained—more than once—that she is to be afforded every convenience and luxury we would offer any visiting royal.”

A satisfied smile spanned Guyan’s face. “Well, that explains quite a lot. I wonder if we shouldn’t send someone to alert young Alastor to the fact that his sister is happy? Perhaps encourage him to live a life that isn’t preoccupied with convincing people to challenge a drekkan king?”

Aedan's hand had tightened around mine during the conversation. I didn't want to do anything at Guyan's suggestion, but I also didn't want Alastor wandering around the forest forever. "Can we do that? Send someone to tell him?"

"Of course." Aedan finally turned from Guyan to me. "If I'd had any idea he was still out there, I would have done something ages ago."

I squeezed his hand back. "I know."

Guyan swallowed a bite of meat and dabbed at his chin with a napkin. "I'm glad we've resolved this. I'd feel terrible leaving him out there for years."

Acantha reached a hand over to Guyan's arm. "What were your thoughts on the curse? Surely you've had some ideas since you managed to get through the barrier?"

"Yes, Sena," he said. "I believe—" He paused, like an actor building drama on the stage. After scanning all five of us, he spread his arms and placed his palms on the table. "I have many reasons to believe that Callista and Alastor's mother was the fae who cursed Aedan and the barrier."

He clearly expected a big response, but instead Mylo buried his face in his goblet, the aunt sighed, and Fagan bit back a chuckle.

Guyan folded his arms. "You already knew." That elf could read people so easily it was scary.

"Yes," Aedan answered. "We knew." He promptly placed a bite of chicken in his mouth so he wouldn't have to say anything else.

Guyan recovered quickly. "Well, then you've probably already discussed the possibility that since her blood runs in their veins, they could destroy the curse."

Acantha's brows lifted as she turned to Aedan. He shook his head. "No, it is not so simple. As you've already discovered, Callista and Alastor are only half fae. Callista does not have any magic that will fight curses."

Guyan's trouble-filled grin casually loped across his face. It was like Koan's, but more sinister. "Then it's a good thing I've come home. I think

I can find a solution.”





CHAPTER 30: AEDAN

I wasn't sure if Mylo's warning was predisposing me to see trouble where none existed, or if Guyan's friendly helpfulness really did feel more sinister than I'd noticed before. The way he'd offered his help, and then abruptly been distracted by this year's karkin hatching, and then the nobles inside Sirun, and then which cooks remained, and then rearranging the hall for a dance seemed like an ominous foreshadowing of an idea I wouldn't like. He'd given just enough to get me curious and then jumped from one topic to another until the meal was over.

Guyan strode to the front of the dais, spread his arms, and sent his voice across the hall on magic sound waves. "Lords, ladies, and everyone else who has joined us tonight, thank you for such a gracious welcome. It has been too long since I've enjoyed the hospitality of Sirun's Dining Hall."

Normally, I'd think nothing of him addressing our court. But after talking to Mylo, I wondered what he was planning. I shook my head. He hadn't given me any real signs of trouble. He'd treated Callista as less than he should have, but many elves would have made the same mistake.

Caution was different than judging without reason. I refused to misjudge my cousin simply because he gave off mischievous vibes. Robin had always been mischievous. Koan was a known-trouble maker. And I trusted both of them. I could watch Guyan for signs of trouble without assuming he was trying to undermine me.

Plus, I had legitimate suspicions about Acantha. If she'd arranged for the accident that killed his parents on the bridge, he deserved even more latitude. If that was true, and we ever found evidence of it, it would break his heart.

Guyan organized the elves in the hall to clear the tables to the edges of the room while the musicians who'd provided background music during dinner took a short break. When they came back to play, the dance floor was ready.

"Will you dance with me?" I asked Callista.

Her big, blue eyes lit up. "I've never been to an elven dance." A quick blush ran across her cheeks. "Or actually, a human dance. I used to dance with my father and brother, but I love the idea of dancing with you—if you think it's something I can do without practice."

"Callista. If you can hold my hand, you can dance."

She smiled with her whole face, and I felt that burst of happiness flood through our bond. I hated that bond. I hated myself for putting it on her. But I loved the insight it gave me into her emotions.

I escorted her to the dance floor, wrapped one hand around her shoulder blade, and lifted her right hand in my left. She settled a hand into my bicep, ready to follow wherever I nudged her. We held that position while the musicians played a test note, and then for a few more seconds while I felt the pacing of their song. A three-count ballroom dance. With the next downbeat, I swept Callista away.

She flew with me, easily staying in step, while her hair tossed and her dress spun around her. I twirled her, testing her comfort with the movement, and catching her easily between her shoulder blades. She threw her face up and laughed, pouring more joyful emotions into my soul.

I spun her again and again, feeding off her delight like a sparrow in a sunflower patch. She threw her free hand out to the side, and I lifted her into my arms, tucking her legs to my right side. She tipped her head back and spread her hands like wings. I kept one arm around her hips and my other hand in the middle of her back while we spun again.

And for a moment, we were not dancing in the Great Hall after a feast with hundreds of nobles watching. For a moment, we were the only two people in the world. I held her, and she moved with me, and nothing else mattered. I was as close to her as I was to my own heart.

We came out of the spin, and I brought her back to her feet, pulling her close in a standard position again. With another downbeat, we traveled across the floor, and I thought I sensed new emotions in the bond. Not actually new, but emotions that she might have felt before in smaller amounts—now they were abundant enough that I knew exactly what I was feeling: excitement, hope, and anticipation.

A wild grin broke across my face. If she was hoping for an exciting dance, I would give her that. “We can do better than that,” I whispered.

“Go for it,” she breathed back.

Her confidence in me took my breath away. “You trust me?”

She laughed and slid her hand off my bicep and onto my neck, where she nudged my head closer to hers. “You’ve carried me hundreds of feet off the ground in your claw. There’s nothing you can do on a dance floor that would frighten me.”

A reckless abandon rushed through my heart. “Nothing?” I asked, drawing her closer.

“Nothing.” Her breath hitched halfway through the word.

My hands dropped to her waist, and I hoisted her high above my head. She spread her hands again, as if she could fly, and—while the music built to a crescendo—I tossed her in the air. As she fell back to the ground, I caught her with an arm around her waist and another across her back. I tucked her legs to my side again, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. I used her momentum to throw us both into a spin. When we slowed, I lowered her to her feet, caught her hand, and twirled her two more times.

The music slowed, so I tipped her down in a dramatic dip, resting her hips against my knee. She flung her hands out above her head, panting with exhaustion, but radiating a joyful pleasure I had never seen in her before.

I pulled her back up to her feet, took one hand, and bowed over it. I dropped a quick kiss on her knuckles before I stood back up. She held onto my fingers, but fell into a gracious curtsy. My heart pounded at the sight, and I lifted her up as quickly as possible.

Applause exploded around us. The fools had never seen me dance with such uninhibited energy. “Thank you,” Callista breathed as I escorted her back to our table.

“Oh no, Firehawk.” I stopped walking and brushed a wild lock of hair away from her face. “Thank *you*.” I brushed her glowing cheek with a thumb. “That was the best dance of my life.”

She blushed and radiated more of those heady emotions as I led her back to my table. An elf could get drunk on those emotions. I’d entered dangerous territory—a new addiction—where all I wanted to do was make her happy enough to radiate enough delight that I could feel it through the bond.

After Callista caught her breath and had some more lemonade, Koan approached the dais. I turned slowly to face him.

He bowed with a cheeky flourish. “Your Majesty, as the D’Aeran house representative, I was hoping to offer a dance to Callista.” He winked. I was tempted to light his jacket on fire, purely for entertainment value. “And as a friend, of course,” he added. I restrained myself. We were friends now, after all. As a high noble who was finally acting like the adult he was, he should be sitting on the dais with me.

I nodded with a smile as gracious as his. “Upset her at all, and you will burst into flames.”

His smirk grew into a genuine laugh. “Fear not, Your Majesty. I will do nothing to warrant spontaneous combustion.”

Callista laughed back and squeezed my hand as she left her chair.

I watched Koan guide her between other couples, most of whom were extra careful not to bump into her. I was not sure if they recognized her as the fae I’d paraded in front of them months ago, or if they had simply caught on to the way I’d presented her as my equal tonight.

Guyan leaned closer to me. “Are you afraid Koan will steal your half-human?”

“Not at all,” I answered. “But it does make me nervous to see her so close to so many people when I do not know how they will respond to her.”

“And if someone did try to attack her?”

I smirked. “One of the advantages of my power is that I can incinerate people from a distance.”

He laughed out loud. Flames, I’d missed my cousins and their light-hearted responses to my more serious nature. But my thoughts drifted back to Callista and her brother almost immediately. “Is her brother really out there still?”

Guyan sobered. “Yes. What do you really intend to do?”

“How do you know I won’t do exactly as she asked?”

“Because you have a ponderous look. It’s the sort of expression you wear when you’re considering your cursed sense of justice, and it usually precedes an announcement that I won’t like.”

I sighed, wishing he was not right. “I’ve missed your bluntness, Guyan.”

He dipped his chin. “Happy to serve, Cousin.”



When we finally left the Dining Hall, more than half the night had passed. Callista was so tired that I felt it. My mind worried over the decisions I’d weighed all night—too much to say anything while we walked back.

Once I closed the bedroom door behind us, Callista turned on me. She planted her hands on her hips and said, “What’s bothering you? Is it that I danced with other elves tonight?”

I chuckled. “No, it is a tradition for heads of noble households to dance with the queen. The way we presented you as my equal opened the invitations.”

“Then what is it?” She tapped the middle of my chest with a finger. “I can feel your anxiety.”

“What?” That was impossible. The mistek bond only extended one way.

She shrugged. “I can *feel* stress coming from you. At first I thought I was imagining it, but—” She rubbed her heart. “I can feel it right here, like a wave coming from your direction.”

“Can you... feel... anything else from me?”

She tipped her head. “Maybe? I thought I felt you enjoying our dance, but I had so many emotions myself that I could have been projecting them on you.”

My heart stuttered. How was that possible? “Anything else?”

She glanced at the floor but then raised her eyes to mine. “Maybe I felt a... a tenderness threaded through passion when you sang to me?”

“You shouldn’t feel anything from me. It doesn’t make sense. That’s not how mistek bonds work.”

“Could... could we have changed it somehow?” she asked hesitantly.

“I don’t know.” I took her hands. “Regardless, there is something I need to say. To do. And I need to do it and say it before I overthink it and lose the nerve.”

“Go on, then.”

I squeezed her hands. “Callista, we agreed to keep the mistek bond so that I would know if you were in danger, because we couldn’t free you properly. But if your brother has been waiting for you, just outside the border, this entire time... it would be wrong of me to keep you here. I... I think we should break the bond tonight, and I’ll fly you to your brother tomorrow. He can open the barrier for you.”

Hurt. Overwhelming sadness rushed through the bond, choking me. I had said the right thing. It was the only just and kind way to handle this information. It tore my own heart in pieces, but it was supposed to heal hers. Somehow, though, it had hurt her emotions more than anything else I could remember.

“I... I thought you wanted me here,” she whispered.

“I do.” I tightened my hold around her hands. “I want you more than anything else I’ve ever wanted in my life. But it’s not right to ask you to accept me when you’re already bound to me in an agreement you made based in fear. I...”

The words on the tip of my tongue would make me appear weak, more pathetic than anything else she’d seen yet, but...

But she deserved the truth. “If I had the power to free you, but I kept you, bound one moment by a mistek bond you didn’t want and then the next by a marriage bond you thought you did, I will always wonder if you really chose me. Was it really a choice to come here when your brother’s death was the alternative? Was it even a choice to keep the mistek bond when your own life was threatened by its removal?”

“Of course it was a choice!” She whispered, but her words rushed in urgency. “I could have chosen to allow Alastor to die. I could have chosen my own freedom. I picked—”

“You picked one terrifying thing because you thought the alternative was even more terrifying.” I managed to get all the words out without gagging on them. “You said so yourself. How can I live with myself if I know you chose me when you considered me terrible?”

“Maybe it was terrifying when I chose it. That doesn’t mean it’s terrible now.”

“Or maybe—” The thought burned a hole in my heart as I said it, but the truth demanded my admission. “Maybe you just became so accustomed to the terrible that the familiarity of it blinded you to its horrors.”

“So that’s it?” she spit out. “You decide that my leaving is better for me, and I have no choice?”

“No,” I whispered. “It’s always your choice. I will never force your decision again. I will plead with you to see the logic in leaving a kingdom that you were coerced to enter. And your brother. Do you truly think he will believe anyone if a *messenger* comes to tell him you are happy? Are you really satisfied with him spending the rest of his life feeling guilty over your fate? If nothing else, perhaps you’ll do it to give him peace.”

Her eyes glossed over. “I thought we were finding peace together.”

My eyes burned. “You’ve brought me more peace than I ever thought existed. It wouldn’t be fair to keep you caged after you’ve done so much for me.” My voice caught. “A firehawk needs to be free.”

She blinked a few times, dropped my hands, and spun away from me.

“Callista—”

She froze, but did not turn around.

“May I... touch your back? To break the mistek bond?”

“Yes.” She did not look at me.

I lifted my hand to her back, but paused right before I touched it, staring at my own fingers. It was the hand of a monster, perhaps in elf form, but this was the hand that had made the talisman that killed her mother. This was the hand that had brought pain and fear to so many in the name of justice and safety.

I settled my fingertips between her shoulder blades. At least now, this monster was doing something right. I could not love her in a cage when the key dangled in front of us. I could not ask her to pick me over her brother.

I bowed my head and wrapped my magic around the mistek bond. The cursed magic was easy to find—it had been alerting me to Callista’s feelings for months. I snapped it, ripped it right in half, before I could change my mind. The straggling remnants of the magic dissolved, separating us, and leaving a void where I’d grown used to feeling her emotions.

I missed it already.

But it had been wrong. I was, perhaps, even more of a beast for missing a presence that I had forced to be near me.

“I will stay with you,” I whispered, “all night. You will be safe. In the morning, I’ll shift outside so that I can take you to the border.”

Her head jerked down in a rough nod, and she walked away, leaving me more alone than I’d ever thought possible.

“Callista—” I didn’t have any words for what I felt, and what I felt was not fair to put on her shoulders.

But she stopped. I had to say something. “I... I’m sorry.”

She nodded again and ran to the washroom. Literally ran.

I still felt the sorrow in her heart, like a phantom memory reminding me how comfortable I’d grown with feeling her emotions through the bond.





CHAPTER 31: CALLISTA

I groaned and tried to hide the morning sunlight with a blanket over my head. It had taken me so long to fall asleep that I wanted to stay in bed for the rest of the day. Aedan and his stupid sense of honor. If I was capable of cursing people—

I blew out a massive breath and uncovered my head. If I was capable of cursing people, I'd probably be as repulsed by the idea as I was by the thought of beating someone. And Aedan had been right about Alastor. Nothing short of me leaving Hemlit would convince him that I was not being forced to stay.

Part of me wanted to be truly angry at Aedan—because I wanted to stay, to bask in his attention, to listen to him sing, to translate his grandmother's book, to discover life with someone who loved me—but I was also sympathetic. Somehow, through a twist of magic I did not understand, I'd felt his misery and conflicting emotions as he had spoken last night.

I rubbed my face. Bright sunbeams filled the room, so Aedan was probably outside as a drekkan already. I regretted running away from him. I could have spent one more night in his arms—

A male voice cleared a throat across the room. Panic and anxiety took over my thoughts until Koan spoke softly. "The king asked me to make sure you made it outside safely today."

I sat up, making sure my nightdress and blankets covered me thoroughly, and found Koan leaning on the hall door. “Actually,” he said, “the king was very explicit in his instructions. I’m to stay attached to this door unless you’re in mortal danger.” His light-hearted voice shifted to a more serious tone. “He said you would be leaving us today.”

I sunk backward against the headboard. “Yes.”



It didn’t take me long to prepare for the day. I picked a blue dress with bell sleeves that stretched over my head and didn’t require someone to fasten a thousand buttons. When I opened the door to the hall, Koan stumbled.

I raised a brow. He wasn’t a clumsy elf.

He grinned and patted the door. “I told you—attached to the door.”

I rolled my eyes, accepted his elbow, and headed outside with him.

Spring had descended on the fortress with astounding vigor, and the gardens had sprung to life. I slowed our walk down so I could savor the scents of roses and irises. Koan matched my pace. “One last stroll, huh?”

I breathed in a sweet mixture of fresh flowers. “The gardeners must use magic here. I’ve never seen blossoms emerge so quickly after the snow melts.”

Koan laughed. “Of course they do. All the gardeners have a strong affinity for plant magic—it’s both the reason they love their work and the reason they get employed.”

We rounded another corner and Guyan’s tall form stepped away from a bush. He bowed to me and extended a flower. “Would the lovely Callista like a rose this morning?”

It was a sweet gesture, but all I could think about was Aedan’s rose tree underground. Were these bushes connected to it? Did picking flowers hurt

them?

I dipped my head politely. “Thank you, but I’m meeting the king in a moment, and I won’t have a free hand to carry a rose.” I tugged on Koan to walk around him.

Guyan fell into step beside me and asked with mock drama, “Are you shunning me?”

I forced a chuckle and replied with equal flair. “I wouldn’t dare. The illustrious cousin of the great king? I’d rather make an enemy of a dragon.”

He laughed. “I’m sure that could be arranged. But accepting a flower politely and then discarding it when I’m not looking seems like a safer approach than refusing a small gift.”

I tipped my head at him. “Why are you so adamant about a flower? It makes your *small gift* seem very suspicious.”

His laughter flowed so easily that I thought of Alastor again, trying to fool me by looking innocent. He kept pace next to me as Koan turned into the deepest part of the garden. “Maybe,” he said with a conspiratorial tone, “I’m hoping that you’ll prick your finger on a thorn, and I can dab up the blood. Maybe I’m hoping I can use your blood to break the curse on Aedan.”

My jaw fell. “Is that possible?”

He grinned. “Are you volunteering to find out?”

“She’s doing nothing of the sort.” Aedan’s gravelly drekkan voice tumbled out from behind the tallest fountain. “And if you trick her into donating any blood or body parts for any experiments, you will not live to see the results.”

Guyan tossed the flower to the side of the path and shrugged. “Such threats, Cousin. And here I thought you’d started to tamp down on that violent nature.”

“I will do anything necessary to protect the people I care about.”

His easy statement of something so enormous as caring made my heart lunge for him. I left Koan and let my body follow my heart's nudging. I reached a hand out to Aedan, and he extended a clawed fingertip to meet it. Neither of us had any words, but I felt his emotions swell with love and longing.

Or at least, I imagined I felt it. Maybe it was the careful way he raised his finger to me or the way he lowered his head when I ran to him.

Guyan chuckled. "I'll go make myself useful somewhere else before you two do anything that makes me sick."

Koan folded his arms and did not move. Once Guyan was out of sight, he scowled at the path. "That was strange on more levels than I'd like to list."

"Agreed," Aedan rumbled. He met my eyes. "But the morning is late. Are you ready?"

I nodded, but Koan answered out loud. "Not yet. I don't know where they are but—"

"We're here!" Jolter ran down the path with a long row of people behind him. Molanna, Jemma, Hemmer, Fagan, Mylo, Forten, Ruby, Baryl, and Mena. "I had to let your friends in Bridgetown know too."

I turned away from Aedan and met Jolter and Koan in a group hug. "We're going to miss you," Koan whispered, "but I can't say it doesn't make sense." Tears stung my eyes as memories of these two flashed through my mind. They'd brought me friends, food, and laughter in a time when I did not ever expect it.

"I'll miss you too."

Koan wiped his eyes as they stepped back. "You better say goodbye to someone else before you turn us into embarrassing puddles of—"

Jolter elbowed him. "Come see us again someday. Even if it's in a thousand years."

I sniffed back another set of tears. "Of course."

Jemma and Hemmer gave me quick hugs and promised to work on convincing others that fae and humans were not so dangerous.

Then Forten wrapped me up in a hug so big he lifted me two feet off the floor. As he set me down, Ruby, Baryl, and Mena all wrapped an arm around me or patted my back. “You are the only person who has an open invitation into my kitchen,” Forten said. “I don’t care if it takes a few thousand years to work your way back.” His voice cracked. “I’ll keep a pitcher of lemonade waiting for you every day.”

I hugged him again before stepping back to look at Mylo and Fagan. Mylo, the muscle-bound soldier who had first chained me in the dungeon, handed me a small book. Songbirds of Sirun. “I know all your favorites burned,” he said, “but Corva’s had this for years, and we thought you might like it, even if... well, even if you don’t see them.”

I hid my face as I hugged him and tried to sniff back more tears. “Thank you. And thank you for everything else you’ve done for me.” Fagan joined us and patted my back.

Finally, I stepped back to look at the group of them—the friends I thought I’d never have. I wanted them to remember me with a bit of happiness, even if I hated leaving them. “Drink some lemonade for me.” Speaking loud enough for them to hear let fresh tears work their way past my eyes.

Koan grinned and saluted me. “And make some chaos for us.”

I laughed between the tears and dipped my head in agreement. I would think of Koan and Jolter every time I saw Alastor, and that thought alone strengthened me in leaving. I wouldn’t want any of them spending their life trying to rescue me and feeling guilty about it all at the same time.

I stepped closer to Aedan and nodded at him.

He wrapped his warm, cedar-scented fingers around my waist and launched us into the sky. I hugged his reptilian skin as we flew, letting the heat from his hands ward off the chill of the wind. The fortress on a stone pillar disappeared from my view quickly, and I scanned the hills ahead for the edge of the barrier.

Last time I'd had this view, snow had covered the ground with evergreens and bare, empty trees poking out of the white like little sticks. Today, the landscape was rich and colorful, with hills of green interspersed by vibrant pockets of flower patches.

And then I saw it: the magic barrier.

Last time I'd seen the barrier, I'd been too stressed to analyze it, but this time I focused on the magic it held. Most of the barrier glowed with a golden color. I recognized yellows, oranges, and reds from Aedan's magic interwoven with blues and greens from an elf I didn't know. Surrounding and securing all of the other strands of magic were the more shimmery pinks and purples from my mother.

Why hadn't I recognized and understood her magic before? Probably because I had been distracted by Alastor fighting a drekkan. I squeezed the edge of Aedan's finger as he shifted his flight to follow the barrier's edge. I was excited to see Alastor, but I did not want to lose Aedan. There had to be a way to keep them both.

Aedan landed behind a row of trees and set me on the ground. "I see your brother just ahead. It will take you about fifteen minutes to walk to him."

I spun to face him. "You aren't coming with me?"

"I do not think he will want to see me."

Tears burned the back of my eyes, but I blinked them away. "I'm not ready to say good-bye."

He groaned and lowered his body so that his eyes were just a little higher than mine. "I brought you something." A sheathed dagger hung from a belt buckled around one of his fingers.

I huffed. "If you think a knife is some kind of substitute for the—" My voice caught, and I swallowed before continuing. "For the best protector I ever had—"

"Callista." His low tone cut me off. "I will be shocked if you ever use this to fight. But I want you to have it anyway."

I unlatched it from his finger and withdrew the blade. I recognized the five rubies on the crossguard as soon as I saw them. The unique, powerful, silver magic emanating from the blade took me back to the doorway between our rooms when I'd first seen it.

It represented so much—Aedan's power and justice, but also his new determination to see people and treat them better. It reminded me of his strength, but also just of him. His gentle touch and tender heart. Tears clogged my throat as I clutched the blade to my chest.

"I thought it burned in my room," I finally choked out.

"Apparently it is stronger than flames." He'd always been deliberate when he spoke, but his drekkan voice slowed everything and made it feel more dramatic. "It is the only thing that Mylo's team was able to recover from your room."

His voice deepened even more. "Will you keep it? Please? So that you know you helped me choose a better life. I will not go back, Callista. I will not be the same monster you first met, even if I never see you again. Even if I keep this form until I die."

A tear leaked out of his great, green eye. It rolled down his cheek and tore at my heart. I raised a hand to his face, and he laid his chin on the ground so I could reach him. His head was far too big to hug, but I rested my hand against his hot temple and brushed a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Of course," I whispered. "I will cherish it."

He straightened up and cradled my back with one warm claw. "I will watch you as you leave. You will reach your brother safely, but I do not want to upset him with my presence."

I nodded. This good-bye had to end because I was on the cusp of refusing to leave. "You're not a monster, Aedan. Remember that, no matter what you look like or how angry you get. I've seen your heart, and it is beautiful. And I would love to see you again, as soon as I can."

"You are a firehawk, Callista. Embrace your boldness, and do not fear your weakness. If the curse ever breaks, I will find you." His words bolstered

my heart, as if he poured power into it deliberately. And maybe he did—except I hadn't seen any magic leave him.

It didn't matter. I buckled the dagger around my waist, touched his hand one last time, and ran through the line of trees.

I kept running, afraid that if I looked back I would lose that burst of confidence that had filled me with hope and strength as Aedan spoke. If his curse never broke, *I* would find a way back someday. Even if—like Jolter said—it took a thousand years. I was half-fae. Motab told me fae lived 10,000 years, so I should have at least half that many.

I saw Alastor before he saw me. He leaned against a large stone and focused on the pages of a book. Scattered around him were signs of a camp—a bedroll, food, an expired fire, and several more books.

The magic boundary kept me thirty feet away from him, so I just watched silently. He'd grown a beard and his hair was several months longer than last time I'd seen him. Dark rings marked the skin under his eyes—signs of far too little sleep. All the evidence in front of me said that Guyan had been right—my brother had been trying to free me ever since I'd seen him last.

My heart squeezed for my brother. It must have been awful to feel responsible for what he probably considered my complete misery. But I hadn't been miserable, no matter what Aedan had said last night. My hand drifted to the dagger hilt. Aedan had known that Alastor needed me when I had refused to acknowledge it.

I turned around, thinking I should tell him now, but... he had vanished. "You were right," I whispered, in case he'd hidden himself with magic and was still close enough to hear. "He does need me."

I imagined I felt a warm, grateful sensation at my words, but Alastor distracted me. He ran a hand through his hair and growled at the book. "Come on, Fotab, surely you wrote something helpful—"

He flipped through pages, muttering under his breath. How long would it take him to actually look up?

A large branch snapped behind me, and I bit back a laugh. It seemed Aedan thought my brother needed a hint too.

Alastor's head jerked up at the cracking branch. He stared at me, as if not really seeing me, rubbed his eyes, and then stared again. He set the book down and stood up slowly. "Callista? Are you real?"

I nodded as my throat tightened around emotion.

He extended a hand, resting it on the magic wall between us. "What's my favorite treat?"

"Trick question," I whispered. "You like bread more than any dessert."

A smile slowly crawled across his face as his voice turned hoarse. "Guyan did it, then? It's faster than I expected. Is he here with you?"

I shook my head. "Guyan only told us that you were here. Aedan, the drekkan you argued with, brought me back."

Disbelief shadowed Alastor's eyes. "The *drekkan* brought you back? Did you know he is the king? That there's a curse on him? That he *killed* Motab? Callista, I've been so worried for you."

My heart pinched as I knew Aedan heard everything Alastor said. "I know. Alastor, I know all of that. Aedan, the drekkan, the king... there's so much more to the story than you could have possibly heard, but yes, he was the one who brought me back. Guyan only ever made me nervous."

A blue magic flowed out of Alastor's hand and dissolved the barrier it touched, creating a hole that slowly grew. "Guyan was a creep, no doubt about that. But... I just don't know how to believe that the drekkan that nearly killed both of us brought you back. What made him change his mind?"

I pressed my palm up against Alastor's while the hole grew bigger. "Guyan told us that you were here. Aedan would have brought me months ago if he'd known you could break the barrier enough to get me out."

And I never would have known how much I'd grow to love him. Perhaps it was better that I had so much time with him. But Alastor wasn't ready to hear that. "What were you reading?"

He rolled his eyes. “Everything I could find from Fotab related to elf bonds. Guyan told me he’d get you, but I doubted he’d succeed. I’ve been trying to find out if there was a way to break the mistek bond.” He tipped his head. “How *did* you handle that?”

“I told you, he brought me here. It would have been pointless if we were still bound together.”

Alastor’s eyes widened. “So *he* broke the mistek bond? *And* brought you here?”

I nodded.

“Why?”

A smiled, but I couldn’t keep the taste of sadness out of it. “Because he thought it was the right thing to do.”

Alastor shrugged and shook his head. “I won’t pretend to understand it, but I’m glad you’re here.” He stepped back and rubbed his hands together. “That should be big enough—can you see it?”

“Yes.” I turned around one last time and whispered, “Goodbye.” I couldn’t see him, but I was sure Aedan had stayed close to me. A warm gust filled the air around me. It could have been mistaken for a sudden breeze, but I knew it was a soft huff from a drekkan. One final goodbye.



It took us nearly two hours to hike to Tolva, the nearest elf community that Alastor had worked in several times during the last few months. He explained how he’d taken jobs to earn enough to buy food and supplies for a few weeks at a time, then he’d go out to the barrier until he ran out of supplies, and then he’d return here or go to another little community. Whether he was in town or in the forest, he tried to convince everyone he met to help him help me, but nobody had been sympathetic until Guyan.

He opened the door for me at a small tavern. “I don’t want a drink, Alastor.”

“This isn’t just a tavern. It’s an inn too. I’m sure they have some lunch left, and then you can rest in a real room.”

I walked in with him. “I’ve had a real room. I’ve slept on the most luxurious beds every night since I saw you last.”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about a drekkan breathing down your throat then,” he muttered.

I ignored the comment. It might take me years to convince him that Aedan wasn’t horrible. I looked around the dining room of the tavern. It was cozier than I expected, definitely more like an inn. Sleeping here might be nice—nobody was trying to kill me outside of the fortress.

Then again, would I even be able to sleep without a magical seal on my door? Or someone guarding it?

Alastor led me to an empty table. Moments later, a tall elf with black hair, a green dress, and a white apron set two steaming drinks in front of us. “Tea?” she asked.

Alastor picked up his mug. “Thank you, Arena.”

She turned and studied me. “Is this your long-lost sister?”

“Yes.”

Arena smirked. “So. Not captive to our Drekkkan King after all. You just had too many drinks?” She winked at me. “Do you like how I brought him tea with no spirits?”

I smiled. I liked Arena, even if she was teasing my brother.

“No!” Alastor slammed a fist against the table. Arena raised a brow, and he ducked his head. “I’m sorry. That was not acceptable. But Callista was a captive. Guyan freed her for me.”

“Ah,” Arena said in a mocking knowledgeable tone. “So the king’s cousin defeated him and rescued the fair damsel. Strange that he did not want to

keep her for himself. And does that mean the barrier is gone now that the cursed king is dead?”

“No.” Alastor rolled his eyes. “Guyan couldn’t keep her because he’d made a deal with me. And the king isn’t dead, so he’s still cursed, and his curse-formed barrier is still there.”

Wait. What? I met Arena’s eyes. “What *actually* happened is that Guyan informed us that Alastor has been worried. The king brought me to the border himself so I could help my brother.”

Arena chuckled. “You two have better stories than Old Ganchin. Can I get you some soup?”

“Yes, please,” Alastor said.

As soon as she left, I faced my brother. “What kind of deal did you make with Guyan?”

He sipped his tea before he answered slowly. “He couldn’t get through the barrier, so I agreed to open it for him if he brought you back to me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would he want to get in just to rescue me?”

“Well, it wasn’t *just* to rescue you. He had other reasons too. Reasons that coincided well enough with what I wanted that he was willing to help me to get in.”

I gripped my mug. Something about this deal felt wrong, but I couldn’t guess what it was. “Alastor. Tell me everything. Please.”

He gave me a wary look. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. You’re too caught up in how helpful the drekkan is. I don’t like it.”

I didn’t like how that sounded. “Is Guyan going to hurt the drekkan? Steal the throne? What?!”

“See, Callista, you’re already getting carried away. I made a deal to help you. No different than you making a deal to help me, except that mine didn’t get me bound to any monsters. It doesn’t really matter anyway because it looks like it played out different than I planned.”

Arena came back with bowls of soup and a plate of bread. Alastor relaxed as he lifted a piece of bread closer to smell it. "Now this is perfection. Thank you, Arena."

She dipped her head and patted his arm. "Let me know if you two need anything else."

I watched him savor a few bites of bread before trying again. "Alastor, I really need to know exactly what your deal was. I actually have friends in the castle now, and I'm worried that you've done something that will hurt them."

He closed his eyes and chewed his bread, relaxing at my explanation. "Oh, that's nothing to worry about. They'll be fine."

"Why?"

He finished the first slice and lowered his voice. "Guyan thinks that if he kills the drekkan, it will break the curse. It makes sense, since the curse was on him. I had to check a few things in Fotab's books, but I think he's right. Guyan also said that killing the drekkan would free you from the mistek bond, unless the drekkan passed it on to someone else first."

He raised a brow. "He didn't give it to someone else, did he?"

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. "No. I told you, he broke it himself."

His brows wrinkled. "Yeah, I still think that's weird."

"So, Guyan's plan was to kill the king, bring me back, and take over Hemlit?" My heart pounded. Aedan loved his cousin. This... this was worse than Mylo's suspicions. Even just knowing this would wreck Aedan.

"Yeah." Alastor took a bite of soup. "It seemed fair to me. The king had almost killed both of us and, according to Guyan, killed Motab too. And Guyan was willing to get you."

I couldn't eat the soup. Knowing Guyan was at the fortress, planning to kill Aedan, turned my stomach.

"I shouldn't have told you." Alastor looked up at me over his bowl of soup. "You're all worried now."

A fierce fire burned from my stomach, straight through my chest and into my throat. Alastor only knew me as the sister who struggled to raise him. The one who burnt food, tripped on her own toes, and worried too much. But I was more than that.

I was a firehawk.

And nobody besides us knew Guyan's plans. "I am worried, Alastor. Aedan trusts Guyan. Guyan will use that trust to destroy him. I have to warn him." I stood up.

He filled a spoon with soup and swallowed it before slowly placing the spoon on a napkin. "Why?"

"Because..." There were a thousand different ways I could answer this question. I could list Aedan's attributes, the ways he'd changed, and the good he tried to do. I could list his own struggles and challenges, the pains he'd faced and the values he'd clung to.

But none of that really hit the heart of the reason. The real reason was more simple. "Because I love him."

Alastor groaned. "Oh, Callista. There's a word for that, when a prisoner falls in love with her captor. It isn't love when he offers you the basest of dignities or essentials that keep you alive."

I sat back down and reached across the table to take Alastor's hand. "I know it will be hard to believe, but that isn't what happened. He brought me to you because he loves me. He tried to free me months ago, but we didn't think there was a way for me to cross the barrier. I would really, really love your help, but if you can't come with me, I'm still going to go."

"And do what? You can't cross the barrier."

"I can if you help me."

He filled his spoon again. "Not happening."

I clenched a fist under the table. "If you won't help me, I'll pace along the barrier, hoping someone on the other side comes close enough for me to pass on the warning."

He blew out a breath and pulled his hands away. "I could lock you in a room. Restrain you with magic. Make sure you stay away from danger."

My jaw fell. "If you did that, you would be worse than the drekkan king."

"Really?" He narrowed his eyes. "Worse than a monster who nearly killed me?"

"He stopped when I asked."

"He stopped when you made him a better deal."

I glared back at him. "He got nothing out of that deal. I was the most inconvenient thing he had to deal with for months."

"And yet, here you are, ready to rush back to save him."

"I rushed here to save you."

He set the spoon down. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I took a slow breath. I came here out of love. I needed to remember that. He needed to realize it. I reached across the table again and took his hand. "I know the last few months have been hard."

"I've spent the whole time trying to save you."

"I know. And I'm so sorry I didn't realize it." I let a smirk steal across my face. "I told you to leave. I should have realized you'd ignore me."

He chuckled. "I'm nothing if not predictable."

My smirk faded. "I might not be the most helpful sister, but I've never lied to you."

"I know."

"When Guyan told us that you would be at the border, ready to open it for me, Aedan wanted to bring me back. It was that simple. He does not deserve to die at Guyan's hand. It would be the cruelest betrayal."

He stared at me, held my hand, and stared longer. After a minute, he sighed and let go of my hand. "What do you think he'll do to you if I go with you?"

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

He raised his brows in a skeptical expression.

“Really. I’m so sure of it.”

He sighed again. “Fine. But I’m going to eat my soup first.”

Really? After all that arguing he was just going to agree? “Does that mean you’ll help me?”

“Yes. You should eat too. It’s been a long day.”

I picked up my spoon. I would not complain about that. “Thank you.”

He rolled his eyes. “I suppose I asked for it by going into Hemlit in the first place... and leaving a trail of magic I knew you’d follow.”

I chuckled and swallowed a bite of soup. “I never would have guessed that following you would have led me on the journey of a lifetime.”

“Really. The journey of a lifetime? See, I spent most of my time doing odd chores for elves and pacing along an invisible wall of magic.”

I grinned, my own anticipation mounting fast. “I cannot wait to take you back to Sirun and introduce you to people properly.”





CHAPTER 32: AEDAN

Guyan met me in a corridor minutes after sunset when I strode inside the castle. “Aedan!”

“Guyan.” Why was he hiding in a hall? “What are you up to?”

“I was looking for you. I couldn’t find you earlier, so I took the liberty of arranging for another party tonight. Do you mind?”

I raised a brow. I’d never said no to my cousin, but— “Why do we need two parties in a row?”

“There were a lot of people who wanted to come in last night and celebrate me getting through the barrier, but they didn’t have time. We’ve been getting visitors from the nearby towns all day—people wonder if we’re finally going to get outside of the barrier. We might not have the answers they want yet, but I think it would be good for them to see their king alive and well, despite the curse persisting for so many years.”

I nodded. I was not in the mood to celebrate anything, but he made excellent points. And if he’d already made arrangements, I didn’t need to do anything more than agree. “That’s fine.”

He fell into step next to me, and we walked toward the indoor courtyard. “Did you lose Callista?”

Yes. Yes, I did. I glanced at him. He didn't even know the weight of his absurd question. "I did not lose her; I sent her home."

He stopped abruptly. "You... sent her home? With her brother?"

I glanced at him and resumed walking, forcing him to catch up quickly. "Yes. As far as I know, her brother is the only way to get through the cursed barrier."

"And you sent them *both* away?!" He stopped walking again, but I did not.

"Yes."

"Aedan," he groaned.

"What?" I was not in a mood to guess at his shenanigans.

"Do you think she might come back?"

I finally turned back and looked at him. "Why?"

He rushed up to me again. "She is *half* fae. I think we could do some remarkable things with her blood, including breaking some pesky curses."

I grabbed the front of his shirt and lifted him off the ground. "You will do nothing with her blood," I snarled, not caring that I was truly threatening my cousin for the first time that I could remember. I released my magic in hot waves, so it collided against him over and over. "If you touch her, if you hurt her, if you remove one drop of blood or piece of skin or any other body part, I *will* kill you."

He coughed and spluttered. "Aedan. It was information. Just so you know. I'm not suggesting we do anything."

I dropped him on his feet, turned, and stormed off to my room.





CHAPTER 33: CALLISTA

I pointed down a hill into a valley that held at least ten homes. “Alastor, look! One of them has to have horses.”

He sighed. “I’m not saying horses are a bad idea, Callista. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up. Elves don’t lend horses to strangers, especially strangers like us.”

“That’s not necessarily true. I know at least half a dozen elves who would lend me horses.”

“They wouldn’t be random elves, then. You’re thinking of friends.”

“Fair enough. But let’s at least go into the valley with some optimism.” I needed to be hopeful. We were only two or three miles inside Sirun’s magical barrier. Based on the two times I’d flown to the castle, I suspected we still had twenty or thirty miles to go. That was three or four days walking... or a couple hours on horses.

I needed horses. The thought of Guyan setting up whatever plans he had for killing Aedan twisted my stomach so hard it hurt to breathe.

We reached the valley just before sunset. Aedan would be shifting out of his drekkan form at any moment. Was Guyan planning on attacking him while he was an elf or a giant reptile? And would Guyan actually attack him? I hadn’t seen him use magic yet. As Aedan’s cousin, he should be

strong—a quarter fae, just like Aedan. But maybe he'd try something more sneaky like poison? Or more traditional like a blow to the head when he wasn't expecting it?

The possibilities were too awful. I needed to focus on getting us there and warning Aedan. He could find a way to protect himself once he knew.

Alastor tossed a rock up in the air and caught it. "So, what's your plan? Knock on every door and ask if they'll let us borrow some horses?"

"Maybe?"

He laughed. "That's a terrible plan. Let's see if they have a pub. We can get a feel for who's most likely to lend their horses to complete strangers."

I glared at him. "Don't say it like that. It makes it sound so impossible."

He raised his brows as if to suggest that it really was impossible, but a few minutes later he'd found this little town's version of a tavern. It was small—most likely someone's home who had set up the ground level as a large dining room. A second level had flowers in window baskets, and a small slate propped up on the porch listed today's menu: potato soup with sausage.

"What is with the soup everywhere today?" Alastor muttered. "I've had more delicious food at elves' tables than I ever expected, but today? Just soup."

I stepped up to the door. "I like soup."

Alastor reached around me and opened the door.

I'd been right about the house. The dining room had obviously been built as a large sitting room, but now three small tables and two large ones filled up the space. Each table had at least one person at it, and most had small groups. When we stepped inside, everyone turned to us, and all the conversations ended.

A short elf with an apron bustled out of the kitchen, set a bowl of bread on the large table, and then turned to look at us with everyone else. "Well," she announced, "it's rare to see a stranger here, and even rarer for her to bring a human. What's your story?"

I walked away from the door and right up to the closest table. This was my chance. I had at least fifteen elves as a ready audience, and any of them might have horses for us. I clenched my hand and remembered all the times I'd argued with the king during the last few months. I could convince at least one of these elves to help me.

I channeled any firehawk inside me, and opened my mouth. "My name is Callista, and my story is long and complicated. The short version is that I have spent the last few months at the fortress in Sirun, and we've just found out about a plot to attack the king. We're trying to get back to the fortress as quickly as we can to warn him, but it's going to take us days on foot. Do any of you have horses we can borrow? We can bring them back tomorrow."

At first, I was met with silence and blank stares. Some of those stares shifted into incredulous looks, which then turned into chuckles, eye-rolls, and even some outright laughs. Soon the entire room was laughing like I'd told an incredible joke.

My hands flew to my hips. "What is wrong with all of you? I'm trying to save the king, and you just laugh?"

The elf with the apron wiped her eyes. "Oh, honey. You're going to have to do better than that. The people in this valley have been through a lot the last few years, and they're not going to fall for a horse thief with a story like that—"

Heat rushed through my face as my jaw fell. "I am not a horse thief!"

She laughed again. "Right. And I don't sell drinks." The room lit up in more snickers and guffaws.

"But I'm not! I'm trying to save the king!" How could I make them believe me?

"Look, sweetie," the cook said. "You need to drop the act. You're cute, so it's not likely these elves will hurt you, but I can't say the same for your human. Eventually, the humor wears off, and we're left with thieves trying to trick us into handing over our horses."

How could this have gone so wrong?

“She’s a little too cute.” A big elf with muscles pushing the seams of his tunic glared at me. “I think we should put her to work to pay for her crimes. Let’s see how nimble her thieving fingers are after she scrubs dishes all night.”

“She could haul wood too. I have a downed tree from the storm last week—make her clear it out piece by piece,” another elf called.

“Make her gather stones for my new wall.”

“I’ll give her a shovel and make her dig holes. Giver her some sore muscles and dirt on her face.”

The room erupted into laughter again, and Alastor put a hand on my shoulder. “Come on. This isn’t going to get better.”

I shook him off and raised my voice. “You’re all wrong! How will you feel if you grind my face to the ground today and then hear about the king’s death tomorrow? Or in a week? Knowing you could have stopped it!”

“See,” the big elf said, “this is your biggest problem. If you’d really spent any time in the fortress, you would know that the king can take care of himself. He’s more powerful than a dozen elves, and he spends half his time as a monster. He has the leniency of a starving tick in a pool of blood. If someone tried to attack him, they’d be dead before they knew what had happened.”

I shook my head. “Not if the person attacking him was someone he trusted. Someone he let get close to him and someone he would hesitate to destroy because he just couldn’t really believe they’d turn on him.”

The big elf shook his head and stood up. “There are only two people that even come close to that relationship with the king, and they’re both trapped outside the barrier.” He moved closer to me. “And you need to go before I decide to actually grind your face into the ground.”

Alastor stepped in front of me. “Sit down. We’ll go.”

A gleam lit the big elf’s eyes in a dangerous way. “Now you, human, I don’t have any reservations about hitting—”

I shoved my way in between them. “Stop. Please! Both of you.” I stared up at the big elf, wishing I had his name. “The king’s cousins were supposed to be outside the barrier, but one of them got in. And if we don’t—”

My voice caught. “Please. What would it take to convince you?”

His eyes narrowed. “Either you care far more than you should or you are a much better actor than your first introduction made you appear.”

I pushed back tears, refusing to let them fall here. “It’s the first, but I don’t care more than I should. I care exactly the right amount.”

A tension filled the room, as if this elf, with his towering figure and terrifying muscles, held the entire valley’s opinion in his hands. He was the one I needed to convince. He might not give me horses, but nobody else would without his approval either.

“Please.” I stepped closer to him. “Ask me anything. Put me under a compulsion to tell the truth. Bind me to a promise. Whatever it takes to convince you.” I had another idea. “Or don’t believe me. Come with us. *Watch* me speak to the king tonight and bring your horses back tomorrow.”

I closed the last remaining space between us. He could grab me now. “If you don’t trust me,” I whispered, “tie a rope to my wrist. I swear I’m not trying to steal anything or trick anyone. I just *need* to warn the king.”

His eyes flicked to the dagger I still had belted at my waist. “Which cousin?”

“Guyan.”

His eyes narrowed. “And why the human?”

I forced a smile. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Fine.” He didn’t sound pleased, but I didn’t need him to be happy. “I’ll come with you. And I’m tying you to my horse.” I didn’t even care. I just needed the horse.

He waved at the lady with the apron. “I’ll pay you when I get back, Willow.”

She laughed. “Off with you then, Lyam. Go save the king.”



We followed Lyam silently down a dirt road while the pale remnants of sunlight disappeared. When we turned a corner, Lyam looked over his shoulder to make sure we were still behind him. At the same time, another elf ran toward us and crashed into him.

Lyam’s solid block of muscle knocked her backward to the ground. He bent over and offered her a hand. “Salor. I apologize. I—”

“Oh, no Lord Lyam, it was my fault for running,” she interrupted, apologizing faster.

Wait. “Salor?” I asked, stepping closer to see better.

She waved her hand and a floating light orb landed above our heads. “Callista!”

I nearly tripped in my effort to run into her hug. “What are you doing here?” we both asked at the same time, and then broke into giggles.

She waved down the street we’d turned onto. “This is where my father lives. Broomden’s been giving us one day off in ten, so I saved up for a month and came out for four days.” Her eyes skittered to Lyam and Alastor. “Your turn.”

I scowled. “One day in ten is not very many.”

She dusted a spot of dirt on her skirt. “It’s better than before I talked to you and His Majesty. Now you.”

I wanted to give her all the details, but I wanted to make sure Aedan was safe first. “It’s a long story.” I took her hands. “And I’ll tell it all to you, but right now we need to get back to the castle. I just found out about a plot that Guyan has to hurt Ae—the king—and I want to warn him before anything happens.”

Her voice tightened. “Guyan always seemed a little too perfect.” She glanced at Lyam, but then faced me. “Should I come with you? I don’t know if I’ll be any help, but I hate sending you alone.”

“She’s not going alone,” Lyam answered. “I’ll go with her. And she has her human.”

“Alastor,” my brother sighed. “*Her human* has a name, and it is Alastor.”

Salor’s jaw fell. “Is he your—”

“Yes,” I cut her off. I threw a sideways glance at Lyam and hoped she’d interpret it as a hint that I did not want to tell Lyam any more details about us.

“Wow,” she breathed, just before gripping my shoulders in another hug. “I won’t slow you down, but you must tell me *everything* when I get back.”

She picked up a bag that had fallen to the ground during our conversation and ran off again.

Lyam stared at me. “You know Salor.”

I nodded. “She works at the castle. Does... that improve my believability?”

He smirked, and the shadows on his face suggested a little humor behind his intense stare. “How about I let you ride without tying you to the horse?”





CHAPTER 34: AEDAN

I tapped my finger against the table. Everything irritated me tonight. Music played too loud. Guyan's smug face smiled too often. The goblets held spirits instead of lemonade.

No lemonade. And no Callista.

My heart had grown accustomed to her presence, and her absence gripped it like a vise, tightening it so every movement—every beat—was a battle. If I didn't stay focused, I might forget to breathe.

Focus. I tapped my finger against the table again, in tune to the music. It was a lively two-step, and a handful of children squealed with excitement as they ran around couples navigating the dance floor.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The blood in my head pounded against my skull. My head did not usually hurt, but if my heart and lungs were screaming, it wasn't too surprising that my head would also. Perhaps I should leave the party to Guyan and go to bed—

A commotion at the door on the far side of the Dining Hall distracted me from my aching heart and mind. The two soldiers at the door stepped outside into the corridor. A few seconds later, another guard joined them.

My heart lunged for the door as if it thought Callista stood in that corridor and called to it. An empty hope.

I glanced at Guyan. He was staring at me, and his brows worried together. “Aedan. You don’t look well. Should I call a healer?”

“No.” I stood up. There was no reason for me to stay here. “But I think I will retire early.” My heart pushed my whole body toward the door. Perhaps I would return to my room by way of the far side of the Dining Hall. Something was happening out there.

Guyan didn’t question me leaving until I headed toward the steps that would take me off the dais and onto the dance floor. “You’re taking the long way?”

“Indeed.”

The pounding on my head eased as dancers and partiers surrounded me on the floor. Ironical. I would have expected it to intensify as the noise and movement surrounded me, but by the time I reached the door, it didn’t hurt at all.

And I heard a voice that made my jaw fall while my heart doubled in time.

“I know you’re at capacity, but I don’t need to stay. I just need to talk to the king for a few minutes. If you don’t want us to go in, would you ask him to come out? I’m sure he’ll come speak with me.”

I released a wave of power and everyone turned to see me standing outside the door frame. Three soldiers bowed. Callista’s brother and Lyam bowed. I had not seen Lyam in some time, but I could not think about him now. My eyes settled on Callista. She gripped her hands and held them close to her chest.

“Callista,” I whispered. She met my eyes, and in that one expression, I saw everything that mattered to me. Hope. Love. A fire that lit up the darkness that had been consuming me all night.

“Your Majesty,” one of the soldiers started, “she—”

I cut him off when I brushed past him and crushed Callista to my chest. She wrapped her arms around my waist and buried her face into the space

between my shoulder and chest. My heart tried to burst out of my ribs in an effort to hold onto hers. I pressed a kiss into the top of her hair and cradled her head.

Air flowed into my lungs easily for the first time since I'd watched her walk away from me. My mind flashed back to the moment I'd held her after that lonely dream, and my heart repeated itself. *This. This is right.* I wanted to hold her forever.

But her brother cleared his throat.

Ignoring him, I pulled back just enough to look into her bright blue eyes. "Callista." I cradled her face and let my thumbs brush her cheeks. "You should not have come back. I do not think I will be able to let go of you again."

She smiled and pulled back as well, resting her hands on my wrists.

It was a beautiful moment—one that I would have savored all night—until her brother spoke. "You're making me think you took advantage of your position and her agreement."

His arms folded across his chest, and his scowl covered his whole face. He looked perfectly human, but I knew the mess his magic could make.

And I did not want to fight him. I might dislike him, but Callista loved him enough to risk her own life and safety to keep him alive. No. I wanted to win his approval. Callista had compared him to Koan so many times I'd lost track, and Koan had not needed much encouragement to grow up. A little responsibility and a little more respect than he deserved. Perhaps Alastor needed the same.

I took a deep breath. I wanted to strike him with flames for suggesting I had manipulated his sister at all, especially in front of my own soldiers, but he would rise to the fight. And I wanted to avoid that now.

I turned away from Callista, but shifted one of her hands into one of mine. I dipped my head in a polite—but not too polite—bow to her brother. "Alastor." I needed to get used to saying his name without sneering.

Callista squeezed my hand, probably hoping I wasn't going to torch her brother again. Maybe even trusting that I would not? That thought emboldened me, and I turned a small smile. "Alastor, I believe I owe you an apology."

His brows shot up so quickly that I knew I'd surprised him. At the same time, I felt a warm happiness emanate from Callista. Those two reactions gave me all the motivation I needed to continue. "I attacked you without giving you a chance to explain what appeared to be an attack to me. I now suspect you were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. I am sorry for the harm you experienced at my hand."

Callista squeezed my hand again, and her brother lifted his chin in a twitchy acknowledgement of what I said. His arms remained folded. "I appreciate that, but what about the harm you did to my sister?"

"I have apologized to her," I said at the same time she answered, "He never harmed me."

We both gave her dubious looks.

She grinned at me. "You didn't. Things happened that were stressful, but they were not at your hand."

I brushed a lock of hair behind her shoulder. "I cannot believe you would reduce several life-threatening situations to merely *stressful*."

She squeezed my hand. "And I cannot believe you would take credit for those when you went to considerable lengths to protect me from them."

Alastor unfolded his arms. "Regardless, we're going to talk about this—" He waved his hand at Callista and I. "Later. We actually came to deliver a message."

I raised a brow and looked at Callista.

She tightened her hold on my hand and nodded. "It's something Alastor told me, but I'm not sure this is the best place for it."

I created a sound barrier with magic around Callista, her brother, Lyam, and myself. "Nobody will hear us," I told her. I knew she could see the magic, but I doubted her brother could.

His eyes tracked to Callista. She gave him an encouraging nod, and he took a deep breath. “Guyan and I had a deal. I broke the barrier to let him inside Sirun. He was going to kill you and bring Callista back to me.”

An icy pang cut down my chest. Nothing he said could have surprised me more. My own cousin. And yet... there might have been signs. “Was there anything else he said? Any hint about how he intended to kill me?”

Alastor had the decency to look ashamed of having been party to murder. “I... no, not really. I had been trying to get any elf I met to go in and get Callista. He told me he would do it. I doubted his ability to get her away from your bond, and he said when you died, it would disintegrate.”

I nodded slowly. “It would have, but I already removed it myself. It will be impossible for him to uphold his end of that deal now.” I glanced at the small group of people who knew my greatest vulnerability. “I will confront him about it now. You three should stay out here.”

Callista shook her head. “No. I already walked away from you once today, and it nearly ripped me in half. Do not ask me to do that again.”

A wild smile leaped from my heart to my face. “Firehawk. I would burn my own fortress down before I asked you to leave it again. No, I just want you to wait in a different room so you do not get caught in the cross-fire that is sure to happen. You have a rather stunning tendency to step into flames you cannot fight.”

Her brother snorted.

She threw him a glare.

“What?” He shrugged. “A certain argument comes to mind with a drekkan and a half-fae who were throwing flames around...”

She folded her arms. “And yet we all survived.”

“Callista.” I touched her upper arm, hoping the contact would help us all stay calm. “I am not an easy elf to kill. If I go in alone, I have the advantage of surprising him. If you all come with me, he will know I know something, especially if he sees Alastor. Trust me on this. Please. We will all survive again.”

Her eyes looked stormy, like she was planning to start another fire, but she said, “I will agree to stay in this corridor unless I think you need me. There *are* things I can do, even if I don’t have magic.”

“Oh, I know it.” I raised my hand to her face. “And do not discount your magic sight. You are more powerful than you give yourself credit for.” The drive to clutch her to my chest again was nearly overwhelming. I wanted to hold her and kiss her and never let her leave.

But I had to confront Guyan. If I found even a hint of the treason Alastor talked about, he would spend the rest of his life in a dungeon. And Callista —

Callista looked up at me with her soul-searing gaze, and something feral inside me answered. I tightened the sound barrier, so it only surrounded the two of us, and then I raised a wall of smoke to block us from her brother’s view.

I kept one hand on her face and moved the other to cradle her head. “I desperately want to kiss you without your brother watching.”

She gripped my biceps, lighting up my entire world with so many emotions that I couldn’t even see. “Then the smoke was a wonderful idea.”

I bent down so my lips grazed her cheek. “I missed you.”

Her hand landed on my neck, and the heat from her touch spread like a wildfire. I whispered, “Firehawk,” against her lips and then relaxed as she met my kiss.

Raw emotion ran through my veins as my heart clung to hers. Were we already preparing for a marriage bond? The fact that I’d let her go, sent her away, and she’d come back—without any threats or promises or coercion—meant everything. Standing here, walled off from everyone else by magic smoke, she kissed me back and held onto me with the same enthusiasm I offered her. The possibility of happiness stood like a bright fire in front of me... and no twisted bonds or lost brothers or past mistakes were stopping us.

I pulled back and then left quick kisses on both her cheeks and the top of her head. She smiled, and I pulled her hand up to my mouth. I kissed the

middle of her palm with a slow and firm energy that I wanted her to remember. Then I wrapped her fist closed. “A kiss to keep,” I whispered, “until I see you again... hopefully very soon.”

As I dissolved the smoky wall and sound barrier, I chuckled to see Lyam standing between Alastor and me like a soldier. “About time,” Alastor grumbled. “You have no shame.”

I raised a brow, but did not respond to him. Instead I spoke to the three soldiers who had kept a diligent post around us, but had not been privy to any of our conversations. “I am going inside to confront a threat they’ve told me about. I expect you to protect Callista, especially—”

I pulled my signet ring off my index finger and handed it Callista. “Especially if she feels the need to go inside the Dining Hall.” I pointed at the ring with my chin. “That should get you past any other well-meaning guards. It is, essentially, the key to my kingdom.” I turned back to the guards. “And you three have seen me give it to her.” They dropped into a bow.

“Lyam, I’d like you to find Mylo and give him an update on what we’ve just learned. Please.”

Lyam also bowed.

“And Lyam,” I added. He raised a brow. “Thank you for bringing them. I know we’ve had differences in the past, but this...” How did I finish without sounding ridiculously sentimental? Oh, flames. I was well past sentimental tonight. “This means a lot to me.”

“I’ve never wished you harm, Your Majesty,” he said. “The threat they talked about was believable, and it is why I came.” He smirked. “I’d rather you rule than Guyan, especially after what I’ve just seen here.”

I bowed to Callista and stormed back into the Dining Hall.

As soon as I crossed the steps up to the dais, the pounding headache from earlier returned.

And I understood.

It was Guyan. Guyan attacked me with magic, but he did it slowly so it weakened me without making him look suspicious. But I knew that his magic was most gifted in blood. And my blood was hurting my head.

And then another mystery made sense. My parents' unexplained poisoning. What had made their blood turn on their own bodies? My cousin. My cousin, who nobody had suspected because he was still young and had recently lost his own parents. Only Guyan and his parents had blood magic, and his parents had died before mine. Guyan had killed my parents.

"Aedan! Are you feeling better?" Guyan's smile twisted my stomach.

"Traitor." I hissed the words, palming the table. "I should incinerate you where you stand."

"And yet you have not." He stood opposite me and also palmed the table. He knew I knew. "Despite all your efforts at protecting everyone around you with an ironclad ruthlessness, you continually fail when the stakes are highest. You won't admit it, but you are weak. You secretly care too much."

"And you are a coward. If you want the throne so badly, why don't you challenge me?"

"Boys." Acantha cut in, lowering her narrow brows and pinching her thin lips. She hadn't called us *boys* for more than fifty years. "What is this about?"

I glared at my cousin. "This is about Guyan trying to steal the throne of Hemlit." I spread my arms, filling my hands with fire. "This is about Guyan killing my parents." My head still pounded, but this was no longer about a threat of treason. This was about murder.

Gasps from below us on the floor replaced the music that had been playing. Apparently pointing flames at my cousin struck them as scandalous.

Guyan smiled. A horrible, smug, far-too-confident smile. "But here's a complication, Aedan. I know your head hurts. And only I am capable of curing it."

It was a good reason to keep him alive, but... he'd been plotting for fourteen years. He killed my parents, and he planned to kill me. He was a danger to our entire kingdom. I'd killed for less before.

I willed the flames in my hands to grow bigger. It would only take one thought to ignite his body, but...

Throwing the fire at him with my hands seemed more just—it gave him a chance to fight. “I’d rather live with a headache than a murderer.”

I pulled my arm back to shoot the fire at him, but as I did so, a streak of flames crossed the ceiling of the Dining Hall, sending sparks showering down on the hundreds of elves who’d been dancing. I turned, shocked, to my aunt. “Acantha?” Why had she released a bolt of fire?

“A fight like this will not help either of you,” she hissed out.

Guyan looked as surprised as I felt. “And what would you suggest?” he asked her.

The ceiling creaked and two chandeliers that both hung from the same beam teetered, their weight straining the now compromised ceiling. Elves on the dance floor screamed and pointed at the precarious structures while stampeding toward the door.

I threw a magic shield across the middle of the great hall’s air space to protect everyone from more falling sparks, though it would not stop any of the ceiling’s beams or chandeliers from falling. Acantha ignored the mess she’d created and spoke louder for us to hear her over the din below. “I suggest a compromise that benefits you both.”

I did not let go of my flames, and Guyan’s magic continued to pound my head, but we both turned toward our aunt so she could elaborate.

“If Aedan publicly abdicates, Guyan could create a new advisor position for him to make sure his interests in the kingdom are met.” She turned to me. “You could transfer your bond to the rose tree and your access to the King’s Library, and then be free of the burden of rule while still having the influence to control things you care about.”

She turned to Guyan. “You could take charge of the kingdom without worrying about usurpers fighting against what they perceive as treason or injustice because Aedan publicly made you king. You keep his staunchest supporters because he is still part of your innermost council.”

Guyan nodded slowly, but my face morphed into an incredulous look. “What could possibly make you think I would want to do that?”

Acantha had the gall to look surprised. “I thought you wanted to marry the half-fae? It would be ludicrous to make someone like her your queen, but if you were an advisor... I can’t imagine anyone would protest.” It was ludicrous for her to protest when she was just as fae as Callista, but I couldn’t point that out without announcing my ancestry as well.

“Jorlan!” A screech from below turned my attention. Lady Carmine searched frantically for her son near the exit. She must have been taking him out, but he ran off. I scanned the room and saw him climbing on top of a table, out of her sight, and eating a frosted pastry.

Next to me, Guyan laughed. “There you go, caring too much again. As a king, you must be separate, above. You cannot take the time to worry about an obnoxious noble and her baby.”

I faced him again. “The only obnoxious noble here is you.” Callista’s unfiltered words from months ago came to me again, and I knew exactly what disgusted me about my cousin. “Power means nothing without love for the people you serve. I am ashamed to call you family.”

I threw the fire at his feet, lighting his clothes on fire.

He laughed.

It was maniacal and twisted, and it made me wonder what he could find so funny about his death. Then...

My heart froze. I felt it stop pumping blood. Everything in my body tensed, and I collapsed over the table.

“Put out these flames, Aedan,” Guyan yelled, “or you will die with me!” Guyan and his cursed blood magic!

Would it be worth it? If we both died? Guyan's treachery would be gone, but I would die too. I would lose Callista. And who would lead Hemlit?

Acantha.

One glance at her pleased face as she watched us both gasp for air told me this was exactly what she wanted. She had fire magic. She could have helped him survive my first angry attack.

But no. She wanted us to destroy each other. She wanted the throne, but she had never had enough magic to challenge me or my parents. Guyan and his power in blood had been her plan. Her very long-term plan. But even fifty years was nothing to an elf who lived thousands.

I extinguished the flames on Guyan the moment I realized he was a pawn. He released my heart an instant later.

I pushed myself up off the table and leaned on my arms while I recovered my breath.

Guyan brushed ashes off his singed layers of remaining clothes. "It seems, *Cousin*, we are at an impasse. Neither of us can kill the other fast enough to escape unscathed."

I rolled my shoulders back as my body finished recovering from his attack. "Then, perhaps, you will be interested in hearing the epiphany I just had."

He tipped his head at the same time one of the chandeliers broke free from the support beam in the ceiling that had held it. The stone fixture crushed the table that it landed on, and hundreds of crystals—still glowing with magic—fell out of the clasps that held them to the chandelier. My mind jumped to Callista, grateful she had agreed to stay in the corridor.

More elves screamed. How long did it take for a couple hundred people to get out of one door? Jorlan yelled, his pitch a little higher than the older people around him. Apparently, the broken chandelier distracted him from his pastries. His mother's view of him was still blocked by lines of elves rushing at the door.

And I could not help the boy now. I focused on Guyan. “Did you look at Acantha while the two of us nearly killed each other?” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her face blanch. “She could have helped you, but she did not. What happened thirty years ago when your parents died?”

I plowed into him with more questions. “Why was she so keen to take you in? How much time did she spend planting treason in your mind? Why was she so happy to watch us *both* die a minute ago?”

I saw the doubts fill his eyes. He turned on her. “Why did you not help me when Aedan set me on fire? Why did you not slow his flames?”

His eyes were not the only ones to scramble for answers. I saw her decision in the tip of her head and the set of her jaw. She was about to change tactics.

The ceiling retched again, and another chandelier fell ten feet closer to the ground—this time directly over the table where Jorlan sat crying. It teetered recklessly, swaying from the cord that bound it to the failing beam.

And then I heard a voice that made my stomach drop. “Jor Jor!”

Callista darted out of the shadows and raced for the young child. My stomach turned in knots as I wished for her to get out of the Dining Hall, but also in relief as someone finally lifted that child out from under a moving death zone.

As she picked him up, another tearing sound ripped across the ceiling, and the chandelier crashed toward them.

Callista looked up just in time to see it start to fall. She rushed away from it, but it was too large and fell too fast for her to make it out in time. I made a fire explode below it, hoping to slow it with a wave of heat, but it was not enough. At the last possible instant, an intense, targeted wind blew through the middle of the great hall at high tornado speeds. The chandelier tipped and landed five feet away from Callista and Jorlan. Then it careened with momentum from the wind until it collided with a wall, sending a new set of vibrations and snapping, tearing sounds across the hall’s framework.

A wind of that power could only have come from one family. I caught sight of Koan and Jolter just in time to see them clap each other's hands in a victory slap.

I turned my attention back to Guyan and Acantha. Guyan had followed my gaze and seen Callista. His mouth drew back in a smirk, and he pointed a dramatic finger at her, as if firing an invisible bolt of magic.

She had just handed Jorlan back to his mother and turned to check on us. Guyan's magic was not invisible to her. Her jaw dropped and a hand clutched her chest. Koan and Jolter ran toward her as I turned my wrath on Guyan.

"Relax, Aedan. It's just a bit of insurance to make sure you keep me alive."

"What. Did. You. Do?"

He smiled and whispered. "Look at her. She is fine. Blood flowing and lungs breathing."

Flames ignited around my entire body, giving a physical form to my anger. "I don't trust those looks."

He smirked. "You're right." He pointed again, and she fell to her knees. "Now you can see she's struggling for air, but she will live, for weeks, like this." He leaned toward me. "But kill me now, and know this: You've signed her death certificate as well." He shrugged. "But maybe a few weeks with her is worth it."

My own lungs hurt as she rubbed her chest and looked at us frantically.

And then Acantha struck. "That's not true, Aedan. You don't have to believe him. He wants your throne, so he will tell you anything to drag this out long enough to have another chance at it. Aedan!"

The intensity in her voice rose, so I turned to look at her, though all I could think about was Callista.

"Aedan!" Acantha demanded my attention. She fought for eye-contact. "Guyan killed your parents. He poisoned their blood so it would turn on their bodies but look like an ailment instead of magic. I did kill his

parents, but it was because they were planning to kill yours. They, too, had power over blood—”

“Lies!” Guyan yelled. “You killed my parents so you could groom me in your own plots of treason. Do not try to blame them!”

Acantha’s words came faster, as if she was afraid of Guyan silencing her. “Guyan killed your parents and has been looking for a way past the curse to kill you for years. He blackmailed me into feeding him information. I didn’t help him a few minutes ago because I am on your side! Kill him, and Callista will be free from his attacks!”

A wave of power erupted from Guyan as he yelled at Acantha. “You told me to kill his parents! You fed me every bit of information necessary to destroy them! Told me how to dose them, how to manipulate their blood, and what to say to everyone who asked questions. And *now* you would turn on me?”

“Aedan!” she shrieked. “I have always been your faithful advisor!”

I almost believed her. But then I remembered how she had just tried to get me to abdicate. How she had insulted Callista over and over even though she, too, was half fae. How she had set fire to the Dining Hall.

How she had set fire to Callista’s room.

A new section of ceiling erupted into loud flames, but another unnatural gust of wind blew it—and a pile of debris—out and away from any people. Most of the elves were finally out of the hall. The ones that remained looked ready for war.

Mylo led a group of soldiers and nobles toward the dais. Koan, Jolter, and Forten had gathered around Callista.

A streak of flames burst past me and landed on Guyan. Acantha had attacked him. He yelled out again. “If you don’t stop her, Aedan, you will die with me!”

My heart seized... but I wasn’t the only one. Acantha collapsed as I gripped the table, and Callista fell to the floor.

This had to end.

I raised a hand and summoned a beam of vibrant magic, intense enough to level the fortress. Before I could point it at Guyan, the strength in my legs failed from a lack of moving blood.

I growled, and tried to move limbs with no oxygen, but they refused.

Was this it? Were we all going to die together in one flaming event?

No! I screamed in my head, ignoring Guyan's rants from the flames. I had to find a way to end this before I could not recover.

And then a surge of energy hit me. I whipped my head to the side and saw golden beams of light from Koan, Jolter, Shancy, Mylo, and a dozen other nobles pour into my back. The soldiers with them added more energy until my muscles moved out of obedience more than strength.

I pointed the pure energy at Guyan, and he burst into millions of streams of light that dissipated into the air above us.

Like morning mists fleeing the sunlight, any evidence of his treason evaporated.

And the grips on my heart vanished.

I gasped in chunks of air and, as soon as I could control my muscles, I staggered down the charred steps off the dais and to Callista.

She lay unconscious on the floor. Her brother now knelt next to Koan on her right while Jolter, Molanna, and Forten knelt on her left. They all moved back a few feet as I rushed haphazardly to her side. I searched for a pulse on her throat with one hand and wiped the hair away from her face with my other.

"She's alive," I whispered, keeping a hand on the side of her head.

Koan knelt next to me. "She said he shot magic at her that would poison her blood like the rose bush."

I groaned. Guyan had poisoned the rose tree and my parents... and now Callista.

“Then,” Koan added, “he used magic to attack her lungs. She could still breathe and talk, but it sounded like she was wheezing.” His voice caught, but he pressed on. “She struggled for breath, but she kept saying it would be okay until she suddenly just collapsed. I checked... She didn’t have a pulse. But when you... When Guyan disappeared, her pulse came back. But she’s still unconscious. I... I tried to heal her, but my magic can’t find any injuries.”

I moved my hand to the top of her chest, as close to her heart as I dared get without offending her brother’s sensibilities. Koan’s family was powerful, and their magic was strong—there was a reason they were some of the oldest and richest nobles—but Koan was barely an adult. I had decades more practice in healing.

I poured my magic into her body, scanning for internal injuries and moving to her blood. It had to be some kind of blood poisoning—probably Guyan’s first strike that had seemed so harmless. But like the healers who had attended my parents, I could not isolate an injury.

My heart hurt. I felt it ripping in response to Callista’s pain, like it protested the agony that burned through her blood now.

My heart felt her pain.

The realization dawned on me with so much power I gasped out loud. Not all of the emotions I’d felt during the last few weeks had come through the mistek bond. Some of them—every emotion I’d felt from her today—had come to me through the tender connections we’d offered each other as we’d shared our feelings, our vulnerabilities, and our hopes. They were the links of love—the fragile hopes that the most powerful marriage bonds were built on.

“Did you find it?” Koan asked.

“Not yet,” I whispered. “But... wait.”

I could not tell them that our hearts had been building a bridge between each other for weeks. I was not ready to confess to the crowd around us that I needed her to live more than I needed to live myself. They did not

need to know that my heart, cursed organ that it was, had found the key to saving her.

I might leave them without a king after all, but I would give them a queen who would love them.

I stopped channeling magic the way I had for my entire life. I lifted up her hand and pressed the back of her palm to my lips. “Live, Callista,” I whispered against her skin. “Give me the poison and live.”

I clutched her hand close to my heart and closed my eyes, focusing all my energy on the raw link between us.

If only you were married, my mind mourned. Then you would have a proper bond between you, and finding the poison would be simple.

Ah, my heart corrected, but that marriage bond would make this procedure impossible. If you were bound by marriage, a lethal blood poison would kill you both.

And then I found it. The magic poison Gyan had buried so deeply that it masqueraded as an untouchable illness. Power surged from my heart into hers. It traced through her body, touching every drop of blood and every particle of poison, and drawing it out. I could not destroy the poison with my magic—Gyan had tied it to her blood in a way that my flames could not isolate.

But my heart touched hers.

My heart could draw the poison out of hers.

And I did so gladly.





CHAPTER 35: CALLISTA

I stood in a forest fire. Flames surrounded me, scorching my skin, but also burning through my blood. I tried running away from the fire, but I could not escape the pain. Every part of me hurt.

And then something cool touched my hand. The heat in my head faded. The pain that burned through my entire body flowed to my chest and then... disappeared.

A cool hand touched the side of my face, and a voice—a familiar voice, one that brought the warmest, sweetest, safest feelings—whispered my name.

Aedan.

Aedan's voice strengthened my heart, and I realized I was sleeping.

I crawled toward consciousness, following his voice, until I finally opened my eyes and saw his face—strong, sculpted, but full of tenderness—only inches from mine. “Callista,” he whispered again, brushing his thumb against my cheek. “It is good to see your beautiful eyes one last time.”

He cradled the entire side of my face with his hand and pressed a kiss into my temple. “Please forgive me for leaving you.”

“What?!” I grabbed his wrist and sat up. I expected him to sit with me, but he fell to the floor. “Where are you going?”

Molanna sniffed. I looked up to see her stifling sobs ten feet away from me, wrapped in Jolter’s arms. Red rimmed both Jolter’s and Koan’s eyes, as if they’d seen something truly tragic. The hall was a mess, but Aedan and I were the only people on the ground. Everyone else was looking at... us.

I turned back to Aedan. His powerful body had fallen spread-eagle next to me. I palmed his heart, looking for a pulse. I found it, not as strong as I’d expect, but still there.

He covered my hand with his, holding it to his chest, and spoke with his eyes closed. “Callista. I pulled the poison out of your body, but I could not destroy it. I took it into mine instead.”

What... What did that mean? He wasn’t telling me that he was dying, was he?

He kept talking, slower and softer than normal. “I know I do not deserve to ask anything of you, but I cannot do this myself, and I cannot think of anyone else better than you. If Robin or Jonan ever make it back, you can pass it on to them, but until then...”

He gripped my hand tighter. “Would you please do one last thing for me, Firehawk?”

Tears bit at the back of my eyes. It certainly sounded like he was dying. And if he had taken that burning pain out of my blood— I brushed rich locks of hair away from his face as my heart stuttered with the realization of what had happened. He’d taken the poison out of my blood and into his. He *was* dying. “Aedan. I’d do anything you ask.”

He smiled. “Firehawk.” He said it accusingly but with so much love and admiration that all I could do was smile back at him.

He reached up to my face, and I leaned closer, letting him touch me more easily. “I already gave you my signet ring. Will you be my people’s queen until one of my cousins—my *good* cousins can get here? The curse will

probably end when I am gone, so it won't be too long. Just... take care of Sirun. Mylo and Fagan will help."

My voice got stuck halfway up my throat, so I whispered. "Of course."

"Thank you." His hand slipped back to clutch mine still on his chest. "Thank you for lighting up my world." His words staggered, slower, and barely over a whisper. "I will feed your fire and praise the light anew, spare you every pain, 'til I prove my heart is true. We will burn the world and light the skies we view, Torch every trial, with the pow'r of me and you."

Memories of him holding me—not so long ago—and sitting next to me and singing and telling me I was a firehawk in the best ways pushed the tears out of the corners of my eyes. "Aedan— You're not really going to leave me. Not when you know how... How... How much I need you."

I squeezed his hand. "You're the strongest person I know," I whispered while more tears forced their way past my blockades. "You can't just lay here and die. You can't... leave."

His breathing turned ragged, but he pushed out more words. "I won't... really... leave you. Every... fire. Every... lemon." I choked out a laugh between tears, remembering when he was so determined to like my lemonade. He smiled back at me again. "Callista... choose... to believe... I will... hold you... again."

He took a slow breath, and his grip failed. I grabbed his hand with both of mine. He wasn't gone yet, but—it would be soon.

I refused to look at anyone in the crowd around us. I touched his face. Maybe he still felt it, like I'd felt him while I was asleep. I'd heard him too.

What could I say? I didn't have any words for the way my heart was ripping apart.

But words came to my mind, words that I'd known for years. This song hurt even more because we had planned for me to sing it to his rose tree. But perhaps it could bring him a little peace as he left this world.

I started out slower than normal, humming the verses again because I couldn't form the words. But when I reached the chorus, I had to sing out loud—this was the part he'd found so amazing weeks ago.

*Find the strength you need to grow,
Find a gift I offer true—*

I clutched his hands and imagined his essence rising somewhere, tall and powerful and full of his kind, protective strength.

*Strength and health and happiness—
Find the power inside you.*

A white light filled the air around us as I sang. It pierced his body and made smokey steam rise from his skin.

But it wasn't a real light. It was magic. I was *seeing* magic that rode on the sound waves of my song.

The realization that he had been right all those weeks ago took my breath away. I *had* purged that tiny rose bush of poison. And if I had done it then, I *had* to do it now. If I could purge Aedan of whatever magic poison Guyan had attacked me with—

I couldn't even finish the thought. It was too hopeful, too risky, too dangerous.

But I could sing.

I kissed his hand and sang again:

*Find the strength you need to grow,
Find a gift I offer true—
Strength and health and happiness—
Find the power inside you.*

I poured all my strength and energy into that song, and I sang the chorus again and again, over and over, trying to see exactly what the magic was doing.

The white light flooded his system. I saw it piercing his skin, and I was sure I felt it finding the poison and incinerating it. Just burning it away.

Every moment of light made my own heart beat easier. And if that was really happening—

If that was really happening, all I had to do was sing long enough to destroy all the poison.

Minutes blended into hours. I sang that chorus hundreds of times. I couldn't stop to explain my reasons, so the people around me must have thought I was in shock or denial, but they were good enough to leave me alone while I sang those four lines over and over. They spoke in hushed whispers and shook their heads, but eventually most of them left.

Mylo and a few guards took a post at the door and Alastor got a pillow and a pile of blankets from somewhere. He wrapped a blanket over my shoulders and then set up a bed for himself about thirty feet away from me.

I planned to sing all night—or at least until the white magic I saw changed or disappeared, but somewhere in the depths of the night, exhaustion overpowered me. I didn't remember lying down or stopping my song, but I woke up with warm arms around me and my favorite voice whispering my name.

“Callista.”

“Aedan?”

“Firehawk. Open your eyes.”

I shook my head. “No. If I wake up and discover this is a dream, I... I... I'd much rather just stay asleep and enjoy hearing my name on your lips.”

His warm hand rubbed my arm. “Please, Callista. Open your eyes.”

I didn't argue anymore. I couldn't argue with him when he said *please* like that. After a few slow blinks, the world came into focus... and I discovered I'd fallen asleep in the middle of my songs and landed on his chest—as if he were some kind of giant pillow.

I scrambled into a sitting position, and then reached over and tried to smooth out the wrinkles I'd made in his tunic.

He caught my hand and pulled it to his lips, settling a warm kiss on my thumb's knuckle. Then he flipped it over and kissed the center of my palm. Heat spread from his touch across my whole hand, down my arm, and right into my heart. And then, before my emotions could calm down, he kissed my wrist too.

"I'm going to turn into a drekkan soon," he whispered, "but I wanted to leave you with a few kisses." He pushed himself up so he was sitting next to me, though we were facing opposite directions. He reached over, touched his palm to my cheek, settled his fingertips into my hair, and leaned his forehead against my temple.

"I heard you," he whispered. "I heard you singing, and I felt the poison burn away." His voice caught, so he leaned closer and kissed my temple. "Firehawk. You burned the poison away. You saved me."

I whipped my head around so I could see his bright green eyes. "So... you're not dying?"

His wild smile lifted his entire face. "No, I'm not dying. I am, once again, the most powerful elf I know, and it is entirely thanks to you—"

I threw my arms around his neck and cut off his words with kisses. He pulled me closer, drawing me into his heat and... and his heart. It pounded with so much strength that I felt it, calling to my heart, and inviting me ever closer.

But then he moved his hands—his very hot hands—to the sides of my face. "Callista." The gravelly tones of the drekkan and the heat flowing off his skin reminded me that we were short on time.

"Callista, I love you. I love your unpredictable energy and the fire in your heart. You are leagues above me, but I would give you everything I am, everything I could hope to be, all my power, all my wealth, all my strength, and all my best-intentioned attempts to be a better elf. I would give you everything."

Tears filled my throat as his voice turned hoarse. Perhaps he, too, wanted to have a conversation without tears interrupting. "And," he said, "I selfishly want to be here to see you enjoy it. I want to hear you laugh and

see your face light up when you're happy. I want to see the sparks in your eyes and the fire in your soul when you decide you're going to fight. And I want to be the one to protect you, to hold you, to comfort, and to please you. I want... you."

He pulled one of my hands to his chest. "I want you in my heart. Callista, I would give you my very soul. It's a broken, monstrous mess, but I'm offering the pieces to you. Would you marry a beast?"

"No." My emotions flew in every direction, but he had insisted that I see my weaknesses in a positive way, and I would do the same. "But I would marry an elf who is fighting to be better every day. Who has risen above his own pain and genuinely wants to do right by others. Who is kind and protective and honorable. Who makes me feel important and strong and safe and beautiful."

I clasped my hands around his neck again. "You, Aedan Vander Ignim. I would marry you. In a heartbeat."

A fierce smile tore across his face. He pulled me closer, and I leaned in to meet him. His lips burned like flames. Our time was up. He pulled away after the swiftest brush across my skin. "You should move back. I don't want to burn you, and I will shift at any moment."

I wrapped my arms around his neck tighter and buried my face against his tunic. "I just got you back from the dead. Don't you dare ask me to leave you now."

He hugged me close to him and crossed his arms around my back as he bent his face into my hair and whispered, "As you wish." His magic wrapped around me in a fiery yellow shield. Was he trying to protect me from the heat of his shifting?

His skin grew so hot I felt it through his clothes. Would those clothes ignite? Would a fire get past his shield?

I didn't care. I tightened my hold on him, and he pressed his hands into my back in response.

White light exploded from his body, drowning my senses, but not burning me. I couldn't see anything except brilliant, sparkling white. I couldn't tell

if it was actually an overwhelmingly bright light or if it was just so much magic that my senses were perceiving it as white light.

Despite not being able to see anything, I still felt Aedan—my hands around his neck, his hands on my back and shoulder, his heat burning—while also not burning—everything.

Jagged yellow, red, and orange flames suddenly interrupted the all-consuming white light. They burst out of Aedan's body like flowers popping out of the ground in the spring. These flames did not burn me either, and I did not know if it was because of their nature or the way he was holding me. The shield he'd wrapped around me had vanished. But my heart felt his, and his heart told me that I was safe. No flames coming from Aedan would burn me.

As the flames replaced the white light, he gasped and took in an enormous gulp of air—the kind of gulp I'd expect if he'd been holding his breath underwater for minutes and then opened his mouth to fresh air. After several ragged breaths, he loosened his hold on me.

I pulled my head back to see if I could find out why he wasn't gripping me close anymore. Flames still surrounded us, popping and burning the air as loudly as any real fire would, but I didn't feel them.

Aedan—not a drekkan, but an elf—cupped my head with both hands and leaned close to my ear. “Callista. You saved me again.”





CHAPTER 36: AEDAN

We stood in flames, but I knew Callista was perfectly safe now. They were my flames, and we'd touched each other's hearts enough that my magic would only protect her.

Plus, they gave us a little privacy, and that light show was going to bring an audience.

Callista stared at me in wonder and confusion. I lifted a hand and held it between us. No claws. No fingers as large as legs. "I'm not a drekkan," I explained.

She took my hand and wove her fingers between mine. "What happened?"

I smiled, pressing the emotions into my chest enough so that I could speak. "Your mother called on the magic I'd wasted in deception to make me suffer the effects of my own monsters until I... until I begged for the kindness I'd refused to offer her and felt the pain of love I did not deserve."

My emotions broke free from the walls I'd surrounded them with, and I coughed as they worked their way past my throat and into my eyes. "When you chose to stay with me as I shifted, my heart bled for the truth that no matter how much I loved you, I would never be able to show it properly. We would always be ripped apart at dawn. And you deserved so much more than that."

I ran my thumb along hers, embarrassed at how hoarse I sounded. “I thought I was begging for your kindness when I suggested you punish me for what I did to your mother, but that was pathetic compared to the tortured feeling I had when I asked you to forgive me for dying.”

I lowered my forehead to hers. “I don’t know exactly which moments satisfied the magic, but I am eternally grateful that all the moments have turned me into an elf that you’re willing to share your life with. Because, in truth, that is all I want right now—to share my life with you.”

She grinned at me, and I swooped her into my arms in a bridal carry. A warmth filled my chest when my arm bumped against the dagger I’d given her yesterday, still strapped to her waist. “It was never a curse,” I whispered in her ear. “I thought it was, but I was wrong. It was a gift that I desperately needed to help me grow. I’m sorry she isn’t here to witness it.”

She brushed a kiss on my cheek. “I’d like to believe she is.”





CHAPTER 37: CALLISTA

When Aedan and I finished kissing, he set me back on my feet and waved at the flames around us. “They probably think we’re both dead by now.”

I laughed. “No, they would have tried saving us if they thought that.” I stuck a hand into the flames. “These must be a little transparent.”

His eyes lit up with a mischievous glint. “Is your brother out there?”

I swatted at his arm, and he laughed. Then he extended a hand to me. I interlaced our fingers again and smiled at him. “Let’s go celebrate.”

The flames disappeared around us, revealing Mylo, Corva, Koan, Jolter, Fagan, and Salor standing in a line just outside of where the flames had been. Alastor stood a little closer to the door with a plate full of pastries.

Everyone stared at us, each of them too full of questions to actually voice any of them. So I broke the silence. “Alastor, that’s more sugar than I remember you having for breakfast.”

“Ha!” he barked. But it broke him out of whatever trance had held him by the door. He walked closer. “I was going to share, but I had to wait for the cook to finish a batch. Then, when I came back, all I could see was you two getting burned alive while you kissed.”

I raised my free hand up high in front of my face and flipped it over.
“Nope, not burnt.”

Koan laughed out loud, clapped, and then walked closer to us. “Should I start calling you, ‘Highness’ now?”

“No,” Aedan answered before I could. “She is my queen; therefore, she is your queen too.”

“Ah,” Koan said, straightening and folding into an elegant bow. “Then it’s *Your Majesty*.”

I dipped my head as politely as I knew. Aedan was going to have to teach me a few things about the Hemlit High Court. “We’re among friends, Koan. I think that in a setting like this my name is still appropriate.”

He grinned and dipped his chin, and everyone turned to Aedan, clearly hoping for an explanation better than “not burnt.”

The king squeezed my fingers gently. “The magic that forced me to turn into a drekkan every morning has been satisfied. I know I have cursed that magic too many times to count, but I will not complain about it again. I am a better person because of it.”

He glanced briefly through the ruined Dining Hall at the charred dais. “I suspect it also kept me alive by trapping Guyan outside of Sirun for so long, though it did not keep Acantha out of trouble.”

“She’s dead.” Mylo met Aedan’s eyes. “She died from a stilled heart, a particular talent of your cousin’s, I believe.”

Aedan nodded at Mylo, and then smiled at me with so much warmth that my chest heated. “Since I am not obligated to shift into a drekkan, I expect the barrier has fallen. I will go inspect it next. I believe—” An excited, generous smile sprawled across his face as he flexed the fingers on his free hand. “I believe I can change into a drekkan at will.”

He turned his gaze from his hand to me. “Would you like to fly with me?”

I squeezed the hand where our fingers were still woven together. “Is it even a question?”

He squeezed my hand back, like a silent signal of love. “It’s always a question. Because you always have a choice. No promise and no bond we make will ever change that.”

It was a promise he’d made in several forms over and over, since the first day we met. It was a manifestation of the honor that I’d first found attractive so many weeks and months ago. “I would go flying with you every chance I can get.”

His untamed grin returned as he bowed over our hands and kissed the knuckle on my thumb. “Then come.”

I tightened my grip on his fingers, and he squeezed back. Then we took the next step toward our future hand in hand, side by side, and heart by heart.





EPILOGUE: CALLISTA

Six months later

I snuggled closer to Aedan on a settee in the private library and finished reading his father's thoughts on the rose tree.

When a fae passes out of this life, the event releases an enormous amount of magical energy. My mother channeled that energy into a rose plant she had once gifted me. I had cared for that plant for years, but her last act opened a channel so that the strength and power she poured into the rose could strengthen and protect me. Someday, I will pass that bond on to my son. My mother's legacy will reach her children for eternity.

Aedan squeezed the arm around my shoulders. "It makes so much sense. When you healed the rose tree, your magic felt so similar to the strength I feel from it all the time. Knowing both powers are fae... just makes sense." I snuggled closer to him. Healing the rose tree had been a privilege, and knowing how the tree was tied to his family made it even more special.

An urgent pounding on the door interrupted us. I raised a brow. "I wouldn't have thought we could hear someone in the main library from here."

Aedan chuckled. "Most people wouldn't even know to try."

I wrapped an arm around his waist. “So you’re saying it’s your mischievous cousin, and we should ignore him?”

Aedan pulled me up as he rose to his feet. “Nothing good ever came from ignoring Robin.” He offered me a hand, and I interlaced my fingers with his. A warmth spread up my arm as our palms connected. I planned to enjoy that little thrill every day for centuries.

He led me out of the private room. “I still can’t believe he took over a human kingdom. I mean, I shouldn’t be surprised, but that’s a lot, even for him.”

I laughed. “That’s not exactly how they told the story.”

When Aedan opened the door to the library, we found Robin leaning casually on the wall three feet away, as if he hadn’t just tried knocking down the wall to summon us. He straightened up with a smirk. “It’s about time. You invited a group of royals from across the entire continent to meet two hours after sunrise, and you thought you’d spend the entire time hidden away kissing?”

Aedan let go of my hand and cupped my face instead. “Callista,” he said, turning away from his cousin. “Robin thinks we’ve been kissing all morning. He hates to be wrong, so I think we should make him correct.”

I ruined the kiss because I couldn’t keep a straight face, but it was still enough to get a nice gagging reaction out of Robin. Aedan straightened with a smirk, and I shook my head. “You didn’t warn me that you two grow more immature the more time you spend with each other.”

Robin rolled his eyes and nudged my shoulder. “Are you sure you want to marry my cousin? I know he has some impressive powers, but his sense of humor is dreadful.”

I looped my arm through Aedan’s. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”



Two hours later Aedan and I stood in front of a massive round table, facing the door of a spacious meeting room. Behind us, Robin and his human wife Marian stood behind two chairs at the table.

Koan stepped into the room, followed by a tall, muscular man and a slender, beautiful elf with stunning white hair. Koan had volunteered to be their guide while they visited. “Prince Nolan and Princess Soleil, may I introduce the High King of Hemlit Aedan Vander Ignim and his lovely bride Callista.”

We all bowed and curtsied and barely had time to gesture to the table when a streak of lighting split the air near the door and coalesced into a portal that showed a throne room behind another king and queen. A tall, broad-shouldered elf stepped through, looked around, and then turned back to offer a hand to a beautiful human woman close to my size.

Once they both stood on our floor, the portal closed and they walked, hand in hand, up to us.

Aedan bowed. “Altair. Ella. Thank you for coming.”

The other king—Altair—bowed also and introduced his queen, Ella. As they joined the others behind us at the table, Ella and Marian hugged while Robin and Altair gripped arms. “Nice to see you’re still traveling in style,” Robin smirked

Altair patted his shoulder. “Nice to see you’re still jealous of my portals.”

A few seconds later another streak of lightning ripped through the air and opened a portal to another throne room with another king and queen. This one was wider, and the couple stepped through together and strode up to us. Though they looked eternally youthful, they held an air of maturity none of the others had. Aedan had already told me they were hundreds of years older than everyone else.

“King Aedan,” the king greeted us, “thank you for the invitation.” He nodded at me and glanced at the others. “This is a historic moment.”

“Indeed, King Amias and Queen Caryse, thank you for coming.”

They took the time to greet each of the other couples as they walked around the table. They joked about something with Soleil and Nolan, but they stopped the longest at Altair and Ella. Instead of bows, they exchanged hugs.

“Your portal is stronger every time I see it,” Altair said.

“I think of you every time I do it,” Caryse answered. “I’m so glad you showed me how to make them.”

Robin leaned closer. “You showed Caryse, but not me? I’m hurt.”

Altair rolled his eyes. “I’ll show you when you show me how to change the tides.”

Robin laughed heartily, and the atmosphere relaxed into an almost familiar feeling. We’d hoped it would—Caryse and Altair were siblings, Altair, Robin, and Aedan had known each other for decades, and Nolan and Soleil were on extremely close terms with Marian and Robin. I’d memorized everything we’d learned about all the royal families.

The years of Aedan’s curse had seen far more connections form across the kingdoms than he’d expected, but this final step—of bringing everyone together at the same time—had not been attempted until now.

We were only missing one couple, and it was the couple Aedan had been most anxious about coming. Of all the kingdoms, only Briskold had a reputation for a more ruthless monarchy than Hemlit. Terrarinmarin had come close for a while, but apparently Altair and Ella’s overthrow of his mother—while Sirun was isolated under a magic barrier—had become legendary. But Robin assured us that Aneira’s rule, while marked with the same magic as her parents, was significantly different.

Several sets of fast-moving boot steps echoed down the corridor toward us. A striking couple strode through the door as Mylo stepped to the side. The queen had the same brilliant white hair as Soleil, but she carried herself like she owned the world. By herself, she gave the impression of might and power, but the king next to her was so physically imposing that I couldn’t help noticing that the queen was much smaller than him.

She nodded at Aedan and I. “I hope I’m not late. I’d hate to upset your plans.” Somehow, I felt like she didn’t really mind if our plans were slightly delayed.

“Queen Aneira and King Kendrick, we’re glad you’re here,” Aedan said, stepping around their slight tardiness. “This will be a very brief meeting. We’re hoping everyone has time to visit more informally throughout the day.” He bowed, so I curtsied, and Kendrick and Aneira mirrored our gestures.

All the other couples still stood behind their chairs. Kendrick moved behind one of the last two free spots while Aneira went to hug Soleil. They whispered something before Aneira moved to the last empty chair next to her husband.

Aedan spread his arms in a large welcoming gesture. “Thank you for coming. Please, sit down.”

After everyone sat, he reached under the table and took my hand. I noticed every other couple had their hands conspicuously under the table as well. It almost made me laugh.

Dining staff silently slipped in glasses of water and raspberry lemonade for each couple as Aedan began his speech. “As you all know, Hemlit has had a policy of isolation and secrecy for Sirun for more than a century. This began because my parents were afraid of people in the other kingdoms discovering that our royalty has included a history with several fae individuals, and they feared you might use that to find weaknesses and exploit our people.”

He smiled at me. “Today, that history is about to expand to include a bit of humanity as well.”

I squeezed his hand, and he turned back to everyone else. “I am not afraid of our truth. I believe these differences are strengths, not weaknesses. They have made our lives richer and more beautiful. They are to be celebrated, not feared.”

He made eye-contact with all ten rulers from the other kingdoms and took a deep breath. “Effective immediately, you and your people are welcome

in Hemlit. I would like to encourage a culture of peaceful exploration and exchange and collaboration.”

Most of the others nodded slowly, appearing to appreciate the thought and consider how to respond. Before the thoughtful silence could turn uncomfortable, Amias lifted his glass of pink lemonade. “Floren supports you and extends a similar invitation.” He glanced around the table. “This has the potential to begin the greatest era of peace and cooperation in more than a thousand years.”

Marian raised her glass. “Moorehead agrees. If you’d suggested such a thing ten years ago, I’d have told you it wasn’t possible.” She turned to Robin, who smiled at her. “Today, I’m thrilled to be part of it.”

Nolan raised his glass. “Fazendas is honored to agree and reciprocate as well.”

Altair raised his glass and nodded his head. Ella grinned. “That’s his way of joining.”

Robin chuckled. “Thanks for the interpretation, Ella.”

Aneira raised her glass. “Crossing The Shield is not for the faint of heart. If any of you survive, Briskold welcomes you.”

Kendrick laughed. “That’s an open invitation from us.”

Everyone lifted their glasses a little higher, and then took a drink. I rushed through my sip to watch their reactions. Half of them smiled at the mixture of sweet and tart. Altair, Caryse, and Aneira’s eyes widened, but they each took another sip to cover their surprise.

Robin coughed and pulled his cup back to stare at it. “Aedan. What in the name of hospitality is this?”

Everyone around the table erupted into chuckles. Ella grinned. “I thought it was a delightful variation on a drink I haven’t had in years.”

Nolan lifted his glass higher. “A human favorite mixed with a bit of elf?”

Kendrick smirked. “Some of you were clearly raised on a narrow, royal palate. I’ve never had it before, but I’d love to get more.” Someone from

the shadows rushed forward and refilled his glass.

I leaned forward. “I grew up taking care of a small lemon orchard, and my father—a human—introduced us to lemonade. When raspberries came into season this summer, our cook here—a native elf of Sirun—came up with the brilliant idea of adding them to the lemonade.” I glanced at Aedan. “We thought it would be an appropriate way to begin an era of learning more about each other.”

Robin took another drink. “It’s good, but next time warn us.”

Aedan raised a brow as the kitchen staff descended with platters of pastries, fruits, and breakfast meats. “I did not realize you’d grown so fragile as to require a warning for every new food item.”

Marian laughed. “He’s fine. He just hates to admit to actually being surprised. This—” She spread her hand at the food being delivered. “Looks amazing.”

Aedan smiled. “We asked our cook to find foods that would be both new and familiar to each of you. We hope you enjoy it.”

After everyone dished up a plate and began eating, Aedan set his fork down. “I have another topic I would like to discuss while we eat.” He glanced at me, and I squeezed his knee. He was excited about this idea, but he had confessed he was nervous about how the others would receive it.

But we had both agreed to not let our fears stop our good ideas.

Robin smeared a blueberry jelly across a piece of bread. “Well, go on then.”

“I would like to propose that we come up with a name to represent all six kingdoms as a group. So we can say things like, ‘All six kingdoms have agreed on...’ whatever topics may come up in the future. Or so we can invite everyone with one name. Something to suggest a loose collaboration instead of a nervous independence.”

More heads nodded as everyone continued eating.

“I like the idea,” Robin said, “but The Association of United Kingdoms makes me want to gag. And none of our people would agree—we’ve been

working on getting people to treat elves and humans as equals for years, and we still have a long way to go.”

Marian rolled her eyes. “Just because *you* can’t think of a name that doesn’t sound like a cover for an invasion doesn’t mean nobody else here will.”

Robin kissed her cheek. “The Association of United Kingdoms does not sound like a cover for an invasion. It sounds like a name a group of old women came up with for their knitting circle to make it sound more exciting.”

She kissed him back. “Precisely. Maybe let some of the more creative minds work?”

Others chuckled or glanced at their partners, but Soleil leaned forward. Nolan shifted his hand to the small of her back. I caught Aedan’s eye and looked deliberately at her. As Aedan faced her, others turned to look at her too.

When nobody else was fighting for air waves, she spoke up. “What about something simple like Friends, but in another language? Most of us have several less-common languages in our kingdoms. Maybe one of them has a translation that is... better suited to the group than a... coded knitting title?”

“That’s a great idea,” Nolan said, glancing around the room. “Any others?”

I leaned closer to the table. I liked this. “In The Mother Tongue—Fae—the word *amala* means *friends*.”

Silence followed as everyone exchanged silent conversations with their partners and then nodded slowly.

“There is a similar word amongst the people in The Shield for friends as well,” Kendrick said.

Ella leaned closer to Altair. “I think it’s beautiful,” she added. “It’s easy to turn into a description too—we can all be Amalan while also owning our allegiances to our own kingdoms. It says we’re friends, nothing more and nothing less.”

“To friends!” Caryse lifted her glass again, and everyone muttered either “Amala” or “Friends” before happily sipping their raspberry lemonade and falling into lots of smaller conversations.



As sunset approached, Koan and Jolter led the effort to empty the castle and help everyone find a place to stand in the large courtyard in front of the main entrance. Our ten visiting royals had seats at the top of the stairs where the ceremony would be performed. Everyone else—noble, common, elf, or human—was in the courtyard.

Malinda had agreed to be my personal maid months ago. She put curls, sparkles, and beads in my hair, buttoned a hundred buttons down my back, and arranged the lace and chiffon layers that hugged my bodice and flowed in a tiered a-line skirt down to my ankles. When she was happy with how I looked, she walked with me to the main entrance.

As soon as she saw my brother waiting at the entrance, she grabbed my hands and whispered, “You’re so gorgeous! Thank you for letting me help you!” before rushing down a hall to a side exit.

Alastor crushed me in a hug.

“Don’t mess up my hair,” I hissed.

He huffed a throaty, emotional puff of air. “Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?”

I heard the tears he didn’t let out, and they made me emotional too. “I’m still here. I just have really pretty hair at the moment.”

He chuckled and leaned back, but his hands landed on my shoulders—on top of the sheer fabric that made my lovely flowing bell sleeves. “I feel like I should say something clever or inspirational, but that’s always been your side of our relationship. I just... I love you. And I want you to be

happy. And I think... you might have been right about Aedan after all. He's been really great since we moved to the castle."

That was a big admission, one he'd resisted making for six months, despite how Aedan had welcomed him here, given him land in Hemlit, had people move Fotab's entire library to the castle, and done literally anything my brother had asked. "Thanks, Alastor. I appreciate that."

He gave me another hug and then offered me an elbow. "Let's make sure you get out the door without tripping." I'd insisted on a dress and train that did not drag on the floor for that exact reason.

As soon as my brother cracked the door, Mylo joined us and held it wide while we walked through. Aedan let Alastor escort me to him, but as soon as our eyes met, my heart tried jumping out of my chest to reach him faster.

When we were close enough to touch, Aedan took my hand, bowed over it, and then kissed a knuckle on my thumb. "Firehawk," he whispered, "my heart is about to explode at the thought of joining yours."

I squeezed his hand and whispered back. "Do you think the officiant will skip to that part? Because I think my heart knows it's coming too, and any more waiting might kill me."

He took my other hand, so he held both of mine in both of his, and tipped his head at the officiant, who started to address the audience. "He is a fan of yours, but he might have a few things to say first."

The officiant was Fagan, and he had traveled here from Floren with King Amias's group. After a few more minutes where I was entirely focused on the warm, excited emotions I felt from Aedan, Fagan turned to us. "Two of my favorite people. You cannot imagine how happy I am to have the honor of officiating in your marriage bond."

He let his eyes travel from Aedan's to mine. "You've been through a lot together, more than many couples at this point, but it does not end here. This is the beginning of what may be thousands of joyful years for you. Remember the moments when you first risked trust. When you first offered each other a little piece of yourselves. When you first risked

yourselves for each other. Come back to those moments when you get frustrated. When you are tempted to say things that will hurt the bond you are about to make.”

He settled his hand on ours and his throat thickened. “This bond can bring you more happiness than any other commitment you’ve made so far, but you must feed it. Be careful with each other’s feelings. There is no familiarity that will make you impervious to hurt. Apologize when you make mistakes.”

His old eyes crinkled into a smile. “I have all the confidence in you both. Are you ready?”

We both nodded.

He squeezed our hands and let go of them. A beam of glowing light wrapped around our clasped hands and ran in spirals along each of our arms.

Aedan tightened his hold on my hands and began. “I, Aedan Vander Ignim, offer my heart, soul, body, power, life, name, and kingdom to you, Callista Blackwater. I offer them all willingly, and with no restraint, as signs of my love for you.”

His magic ran like a red beam along the light already connecting us, flooding me with its warm strength and surrounding my heart, holding it in a careful embrace.

I spoke the words to activate the bond. “I, Callista Blackwater, offer my heart, soul, body, power, and life to you, Aedan Vander Ignim. I offer them all willingly, and with no restraint, as signs of my love for you.”

A shimmery pink light rose from my heart and traced along his magic. Excited and hopeful, it touched his heart and erupted in joy. Pink fae magic surrounded us like a cloud, blocking out my view of everyone but Aedan.

His wild smile jumped across his face. “I feel that,” he whispered. “Your magic is so beautiful.”

I nearly cried. He'd always said that, but he was the first person who'd ever seen me as powerful.

Louder, he said, "I, Aedan, accept your offering."

A band of magic tightened around my heart and connected it to his. I felt his pulse, felt his breath, felt his power, felt his joy. I sealed the oaths. "I, Callista, accept your offering too."

Our powers wrapped around each other. His sank into my heart, mine charged into his, and together, they expanded to fill both our chests. The pressure around our hearts disappeared, leaving behind only a connection that bound me to him and him to me.

I felt the layers of his magic—his control over fire, his ability to shift, and hundreds of other abilities—weave into my soul. I knew, with the same knowledge that I knew how to walk, that I could access any of that power.

And he could access mine. What did he think now that he knew its precise depths and exact capacities? His energy hummed through the bond. I could feel his emotions. He was not disappointed or upset at all. He was happy. So happy. An undercurrent of awe carried his joy straight into my heart.

He leaned close to my ear. "Thank you, Callista." He tightened his hold on my hands. "I did not realize how vulnerable this bond would make you. That you would be exposing your soul to me so completely. I swear, on all that I am and might become, that I will cherish and protect you in every way possible."

I pressed my cheek against his. "You exposed yourself just as much."

His rogue smile curved against my cheek. "Yes, but I bared my soul to you ages ago. You've been protecting it for months. I want you to know I will do the same."

He kissed the corner of my mouth, and Fagan cleared his throat.

The sound was stern, but the old elf smiled. "I believe you had some rings?"

I raised a brow, but Aedan reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out two bands with matching flames engraved into the surfaces. "Alastor told

me rings were especially important to humans, that many of them considered it a sign of belonging to their spouse. I wouldn't want anyone to mistake you as not belonging to me, nor me as not belonging to you."

He slid the smaller one onto my ring finger, and then brought it to his mouth and kissed it. My heart sped up as his lips brushed my skin. Oh, flames! He would know every time he stirred any emotions in me now!

His entire face transformed as a feral smile took over his features, and he pressed his ring into my hand. I slid it onto his finger and kissed it too, silently thrilling as I felt his heart rate increase. This marriage bond was going to be delightful.

"It is my honor to declare you married," Fagan announced loudly as Aedan scooped me into a bridle hold in his arms and pulled me close for a kiss.

He spun us around a few times and then faced our audience. "The D'Aeran House is hosting a celebration for anyone who would like to join tonight at the fortress. My bride and I will be spending the night elsewhere."

An elf who worked in the stables led a massive horse up to the steps below us. He had several bags tied to his sides, but he still looked like he could carry four large elves. And the saddle stretched longer than normal, as if specifically designed to accommodate the Elf King and I. Aedan practically skipped down the stairs and jumped onto the horse while still carrying me.

I snuggled closer to his warmth as he wrapped one arm around my waist and snapped the reins with his other. We raced off the courtyard to cheers and whistles. Once we cleared the bridge, he sped up even more to get us past Bridgetown. When that was behind us too, he kept the horse running.

"Is there a deadline, husband of mine?"

"Yes." He grinned down at me, finally slowing the horse enough to talk properly. "The rest of our lives starts now, and I will not walk or meander into it. I will run, full speed, into anything that waits for me, as long as I'm rushing into it with you."

I twisted around so I could wrap my arms around his neck. “I hope this horse knows where it’s going.”

“Why?”

“Because I intend to start kissing you right now.”

He cradled my head and bent down to meet my lips in a kiss that remembered everything we’d already been through and promised devotion in all the adventures we still had ahead. He was right. I would take them all, every joyful moment and every fiery trial, as long as we charged through those flames together.



THE END

CALLISTA'S LEMONADE



Callista's Lemonade

FIRST: Heat until sugar dissolves:

1 cup water

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar or sugar substitute

Aedan's note: some elves require extra sugar.

SECOND: Squeeze 1 cup of lemon juice into
a large pitcher (about 4-6 lemons).

THIRD: Add the sugar water to the
lemon juice.



FOURTH: Add 2-3 cups of COLD water.

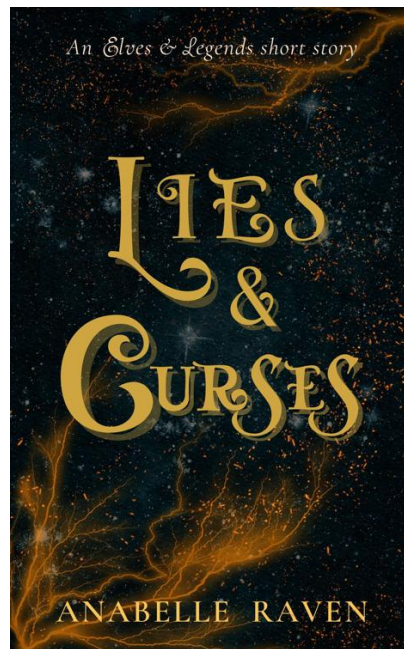
Aedan's note: raspberries are good too.

HEMLIT'S ROYAL FAMILIES



BONUS SCENE & SHORT STORY (1 OF 2):

Would you like to see the moment Aedan and Robyn met Radira (and the disaster that followed)? If so, check out *Lies & Curses*, an *Elves & Legends* short story! You can get a free copy by joining Anabelle's Email Book Club at <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/d4tewx345g>.



Special Note: If you're already in Anabelle's Book Club, you can get this story by clicking on the link for exclusive freebies at the bottom of any email from her.

BONUS SCENE & SHORT STORY (2 OF 2):

Callista's parents had an adventurous start to their story too! *Radira and the Human* is a longer short story that shares their adorable and dangerous meet-cute! It's also free for Anabelle's Email Book Club Members at <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/ugrijaau5j> .

Special Note: If you're already in Anabelle's Book Club, you can get this story by clicking on the link for exclusive freebies at the bottom of any email from her after April 28th, 2025.

NOTE FROM AUTHOR

Callista and the Elf is the 5th book (and the last book I originally planned) in the Elves & Legends series. Writing that final *The End* was an emotional moment! I am incredibly grateful to every single one of you who took a chance on these books and read them, shared them, shared them with others, left reviews, or messaged me about them. It has been a wonderful journey for me, and I have loved sharing it with you!

That said, I'm not quite ready to walk away from this world! I planned the five "main series" books over a year ago, but as they've grown from outlines into full novels, I've discovered several more characters with stories that need sharing too. These books will be side projects during the next few years. (I've already outlined two fairy tales that will take place in an adjacent world—the fae realm that was hinted at in this book. These will both be released in 2026.)

Coming up next from me will be the Morntag Dragons and Kingdoms books—the [first one \(A Dragon Inside\)](#) will release in just a few months!

And finally, I thought it would be fun to leave you with a few little facts that might make this story a bit more personal:

1- I have always loved music! I don't play a lute, but I am trying to learn the ukulele. I do play the piano.

2- Karkins were inspired by Atlantic ghost crabs. They have a very clever way of unwrapping their maxillipeds to clean their eyes that totally looks

like something out of a fantasy world. They do not, unfortunately, shoot fire.

3- Firehawks are a real thing in our world. Look them up. They are brilliant, and I have loved them for ages!

4- Tanagers also exist in our world. I might be mildly obsessed with birds. They work their way into most of my books.

5- One of my personal projects with this entire series has been to show different ways women can be strong and men can be powerful. I consider every female main character in this series a strong woman. Some, like Aneira and Marian, have physical strengths that are easy to see while others—including Callista—have strengths that are not so obvious, but are just as powerful. I also loved how Aedan's power was not diminished when he embraced kindness and love. These gentler traits actually made his influence greater and his power stronger.

If you'd like to connect with me, please join my Email Book Club (<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/dl5eut82hy>) or say "Hi!" on Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/anabelle.raven.author>)!

Happy reading!

Anabelle Raven

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

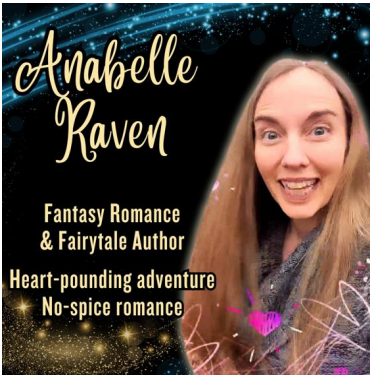
This book could not exist without the support, encouragement, and inspiration from my husband and children. They are amazing, and I am truly grateful for them.

I am also grateful for the insight and support I've received from family, friends, and colleagues at various stages of this book. I appreciate everyone who has read my work, edited, shared feedback, and helped make it better, especially Amanda H., Crystal L., Leia L., Tressa P., Allie G., Madelyn S., Gabrielle L., Eliza P., Mikayla C., Erin H., Sara F., Mindy N., and all of the Once Upon a Pen ladies.

Thank you to every reader for joining me in this journey. Every page you read, every book you purchase, every note you send, every review you post, every comment, like, or share lifts me up. You motivate me to keep writing. Thank you for being here and for loving my characters along with me!

Last, and perhaps greatest of all, I would end this book with redemption and forgiveness themes by acknowledging the ultimate source of power, peace, and love. To God be the glory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



An
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lle
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ven
wri

tes enchanting stories to transport readers to new worlds brimming with magic, mystery, and adventure!

Her fantasy books weave courage, friendship, and love into powerful characters that overcome challenges and explore possibilities.

She loves happy endings and sweet, no-spice romance.

She has an insane amount of energy that is constantly split between hyperfocusing on one project and getting distracted by another.

When she's not writing, she's usually going on her own adventures with her family, hiking, running, reading, playing piano, experimenting with sugar-free recipes, and playing with her kids.